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The former Sporting, Rennes and Leeds United forward has arguably been the outstanding attacker in Europe so far this season and we've taken a deep dive into his career, telling the story of how he became the latest Brazilian to light up Barca.

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IMPORTANT MESSAGE

You may have seen recent news reports regarding the planned closure of a number of TG Jones stores, formerly known as WH Smith. At present, it remains unclear whether the store from which you currently purchase World Soccer will be affected. To ensure you continue receiving future issues without interruption, we encourage you to consider one of the following alternative options should your local store close:

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Italy...Nico Paz watches the ball hit the back of the net in Como's stunning 4-1 Champions League win over Manchester United

Argentina...Boca Juniors supporters unveil a tifo of Diego Maradona ahead of November's *Superclasico*, in which they defeated nine-man River Plate 1-0

United States...St Louis City win the US Open Cup, the first major trophy in the club's seven-year history

China...drinks bottles in Beijing featuring Kylian Mbappe, who caused controversy in the country after joking about a social media meme of former leader Mao Zedong

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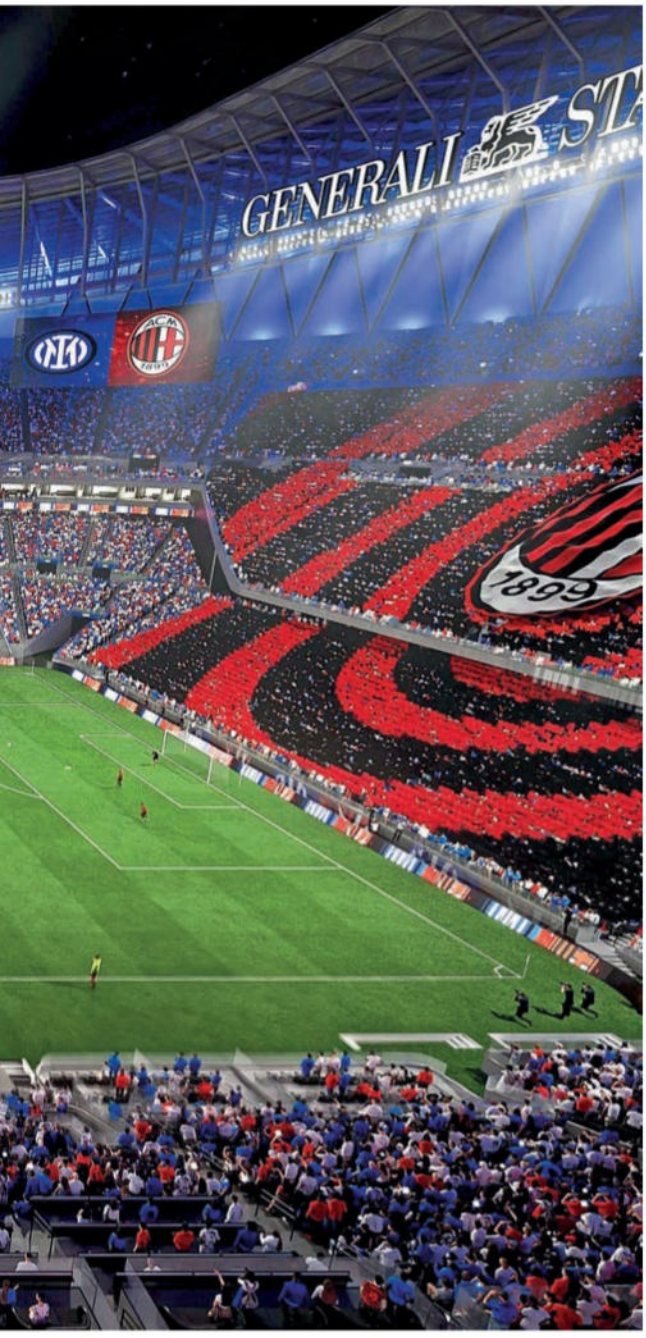
England...a huge tifo displayed by Bournemouth supporters ahead of their Europa League clash with Milan asking: "How did we end up here?"



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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

The 2026 Ballon d'Or: who I voted for and why

In deservedly winning the Ballon d'Or, Harry Kane was the man for all reasons. The Bayern Munich and England centre-forward scored highly on all three criteria that the organisers, *France Football*, send to us judges: individual performance, collective (trophies) and role-model qualities. Kane scored 73 goals in 65 games. He won the Bundesliga. He is widely admired for playing the game the right way, all leadership, humility and no simulation, and living life the right way, the perfect family man.

Kane also has a strong and long commitment to campaigns ranging from protecting the environment, safeguarding youngsters' mental health and battling to defend inner-city playing fields threatened by developers. In a very competitive field this year, Kane took my vote for the Ballon d'Or.

The emotion with which Kane spoke on collecting the prestigious award at the London Palladium made me even more convinced that he was the right choice. Kane reflected on his journey, the difficulties he encountered while trying to break through at Tottenham Hotspur, the learning on loan down the pyramid at Leyton Orient, Millwall, Norwich City and Leicester City. He talked of the joys and goalscoring record but no glory at Spurs, and then truly delivering at Bayern and the records with England.

The 33-year-old proclaimed his gratitude to team-mates and coaches past and present. He declared his love and appreciation of Kate, his wife and best friend, and his parents Pat and Kim, who drove him everywhere growing up, and his exuberant brother Charlie. Kane knew the sacrifices they made in helping him find a way through the foothills of his career to the present heights. His voice shook with pride and his eyes glistened, revealing further how much this moment mattered.

Any remaining sceptics doubting the importance of an individual award in a team sport need only look at Kane's reaction. It was uplifting to behold and fitting that the ceremony was staged in London rather than its usual regal residence in Paris. Some overseas conspiracy theorists felt it must have been pre-planned that Kane, a Londoner, would win the Ballon d'Or and not the Parisian Kylian Mbappe but it was organised long in advance. *France Football* wanted an English location to celebrate the award's 70th anniversary, the great Sir Stanley Matthews was the first recipient and descendants of the late, great Wizard of the Dribble were in attendance.

Best in the world... Kane clutches the Ballon d'Or trophy

The Ballon d'Or is voted for by journalists from each of the 100 top-ranked nations. Some back their compatriots – the esteemed Scottish judge voted Scott McTominay as the world's best player last year. As the judge representing England, I frequently get lambasted for the opposite – for not supporting an English player. This year, I voted for three Englishmen in my top ten.

In 21 years voting for the Ballon d'Or, I'd never voted for an Englishman before. No Englishman featured in the top three in that time, barring Jude Bellingham behind Vinicius Junior and Rodri in 2024, so I was hardly swimming against the foreign tide. Winners in that period, all deservedly, were: Lionel Messi with a record eight trophies, Cristiano Ronaldo (five), Fabio Cannavaro, Kaka, Luka Modric, Karim Benzema, Rodri and Ousmane

Dembele. And now the captain of England.

Kane just beat Mbappe to the award. The Real Madrid and France forward was ahead in the early stages of the vote but Kane reeled him in. For all Mbappe's individual brilliance, there was no trophy on his CV. This always leads to a debate about what constitutes a great season. Winning matters.

Being a Ballon d'Or judge is a great honour and also very lively having your judgement, occasionally your parentage, disputed on social media. It's good to be able to write and talk about it again. The process is a lonely business, analysing all the candidates without discussing evaluations with others. It's instinctively what we do as football fans, share views, make lists, argue, agree, then go round again. Ballon d'Or organisers are understandably big on confidentiality.

Organisers want the big reveal on the night, and it was a huge moment when Kane was announced, wonderful for him, devastating for his rivals.

I have never known such interest in the Ballon d'Or; perhaps because the field has opened up in the post-Messi/Ronaldo era, perhaps because a younger generation of fans follow individuals as much as teams, or perhaps because clubs and coaches trumpeted the cases of their players.

"Work hard in silence," Kane posted after his victory. "Let success be your noise." This was perceived as a dig at those like Mbappe and Lamine Yamal who made noisy claims about their own credentials but actually it was as much about Kane's dedication to working hard in private to ensure he delivers on matchday. Let's not forget Bayern banged the drum for their man.

Away from all the noise, I divided the process of picking my top ten – awarding a rising scale of points – into two waves of thoughts. First, following the climax of the club season, I assessed the 30-strong shortlist. This was important in the case of a star like Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and what I call the George Best protocol. Wonderful player, great entertainer, but not going to the World Cup because his country, Georgia, never qualified. I wasn't going to leave one of the stars of the Champions League season out of my top ten.

The second phase came on the flight home after the World Cup final. Tournaments play a considerable part in the Ballon d'Or. I spent a day going through stats and clips. Five stood out for me: Kane, Rodri, Yamal, Mbappe and Kvaratskhelia. It just became an issue of order. I determined on Kane from a long way out. He wasn't England's best player at the World Cup – Bellingham and Anthony Gordon were ahead. But he still scored six times and his prolific touch throughout the period demanded acknowledgement.

Rodri finished fourth overall but I had him second. He enjoyed a phenomenal season. He was named the best player at the World Cup, dominating midfield, and leading Spain to victory. All that glory came on top of winning the FA Cup and EFL Cup with Manchester City. Like Kane, Rodri's a magnificent role model and fights for the cause of fellow-pros.

Many eloquent cases were made for Yamal but I didn't think he had the best of World Cups, certainly not comparable to Rodri. I voted him third, where he finished overall. I had Kvaratskhelia fourth; he finished sixth overall.

I voted Mbappe down in fifth purely because he'd finished the season trophyless. In sixth, I put Pau Cubarsi and initially I had him higher. He'd won La Liga and the World Cup at just 19. Defenders rarely catch the judge's eye, beyond Cannavaro in 2006. Cubarsi finished 12th in the final standings which I felt was harsh. Michael Olise came in ninth but I had him higher, in seventh, for his exhilarating performances in the Bundesliga and Champions League and early in the World Cup.

In 21 years voting for the Ballon d'Or, I'd never voted for an Englishman before

I felt Bellingham was the best player at the World Cup, just ahead of Rodri. The Englishman is truly world class and kept raising his game in the tournament, so I placed him eighth. He finished 11th overall. A lot of judges love Messi, and he was a guiding light and a rare figure of grace for Argentina at the World Cup. I had him ninth but I was clearly out of kilter with many of my colleagues, who put Messi fifth.

In tenth place, I was torn between Declan Rice, Erling Haaland and Fabian Ruiz. I probably spent as much time on this final point than on all the rest. Strong cases could be made for all of them. All are winners, all are role models. In the end, I went for Rice having voted him ahead of Haaland (and Bruno Fernandes) as Footballer of the Year in the Football Writers' Awards. Rice has had the year of his life, and Arsenal's title-winning, driving force from midfield deserved at least some recognition. Three lions on my list, deservedly led by Harry Kane.

2026 Ballon d'Or results

FINAL RANKINGS

1. Harry Kane *(England & Bayern Munich)*
2. Kylian Mbappe *(France & Real Madrid)*
3. Lamine Yamal *(Spain & Barcelona)*
4. Rodri *(Spain & Manchester City)*
5. Lionel Messi *(Argentina & Inter Miami)*
6. Khvicha Kvaratskhelia *(Georgia & Paris Saint-Germain)*
7. Ousmane Dembele *(France & Paris Saint-Germain)*
8. Erling Haaland *(Norway & Manchester City)*
9. Michael Olise *(France & Bayern Munich)*
10. Fabian Ruiz *(Spain & Paris Saint-Germain)*
11. Jude Bellingham *(England & Real Madrid)*
12. Pau Cubarsi *(Spain & Barcelona)*
13. Achraf Hakimi *(Morocco & Paris Saint-Germain)*
14. Vitinha *(Portugal & Paris Saint-Germain)*
15. Declan Rice *(England & Arsenal)*
16. Ferran Torres *(Spain & Barcelona)*
17. Vinicius Junior *(Brazil & Real Madrid)*
18. Marc Cucurella *(Spain & Chelsea)*
19. Joao Neves *(Portugal & Paris Saint-Germain)*
20. Willian Pacho *(Ecuador & Paris Saint-Germain)*
21. Gabriel Magalhaes *(Brazil & Arsenal)*
22. Lautaro Martinez *(Argentina & Internazionale)*
23. Nuno Mendes *(Portugal & Paris Saint-Germain)*
24. Luis Diaz *(Colombia & Bayern Munich)*
25. Marquinhos *(Brazil & Paris Saint-Germain)*
26. Dayot Upamecano *(France & Bayern Munich)*
27. Bruno Fernandes *(Portugal & Manchester United)*
28. Julian Quinones *(Mexico & Al Qadsiah)*

29= William Saliba *(France & Arsenal)*
29= Sadio Mane *(Senegal & Al Nassr)*

BALLON D'OR FEMININ
Alexia Putellas *(Spain & Barcelona)*

KOPA TROPHY MEN
Lamine Yamal *(Spain & Barcelona)*

KOPA TROPHY WOMEN
Vicky Lopez *(Spain & Barcelona)*

YASHIN TROPHY MEN
Unai Simon *(Spain & Athletic Club)*

YASHIN TROPHY WOMEN
Cata Coll *(Spain & Barcelona)*

GERD MULLER TROPHY MEN
Harry Kane *(England & Bayern Munich)*

GERD MULLER TROPHY WOMEN
Charlyn Corral *(Mexico & Pachuca)*

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

What is a national team?

With national sides becoming increasingly diverse, the international game is evolving rapidly

The old concept of a national team descended into delusion at the World Cup last summer with only eight of the 48 squads entirely comprised of players born in the country: Austria, Brazil, Colombia, Czech Republic, Panama, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Sweden. Yet its evolving status, to football's credit, runs directly counter to a populist culture obsessed with identity and immigration.

Causes of its evolution include the nation state explosion through African and Asian independence plus European fragmentation in the second half of the last century. That generated a swathe of regional tournaments, including the lucrative Nations League format with centralisation of media revenues. All of it wrapped in a cloak of national prestige which demands pursuit of the finest talent available.

It's easy for clubs who want a better team; they can splash the cash. Trickier for FAs who must delve into family heritage, birthplace and residency. Hence the pressure forcing FIFA's continuous retreat into ever-more-flexible rules and regulations to feed its loyalty-buying World Cup industry.

This diaspora-bending culture is nothing new, despite the acceleration of recent years. It stretches far back to the days before the lure of World Cup fame and fortune, before passports and even before FIFA.

The man who, innocently, kicked it all off was John Hawley Edwards from the market town of Shrewsbury on the Anglo-Welsh borders. He played his only match for England against Scotland in March 1874. Two years later he played a leading role in creating the Football Association of Wales and then, without a clue to the consequences, played in their inaugural international, also against Scotland.

No formal nationality issue was at stake. Edwards was a British citizen. He was free back then to play for any of the home nations: England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Change came only after the creation of FIFA in 1904 to enable international competition and the introduction of passports in the newly-sewn patchwork quilt of a fragmented Europe during and after the First World War.

Many European nations maintained "ownership" over the thousands who emigrated to the Americas. Inter-war Italy claimed the right to summon its émigré sons for military service. Hence the riposte to critics from *Azzurri* boss Vittorio Pozzo in calling up Argentinians Enrique Guaita, Raimundo Orsi, Luis Monti and Attilio Demaria plus Brazilian Anfilogino Guarisi to win the 1934 World Cup. "If he can die for Italy then he can play football for Italy," Pozzo famously said.

The fatal prospect duly closed in on Guaita. In 1935, Mussolini's mobilisation found him served with call-up papers; he, plus Roma team-mates Alejandro Scopelli and Andres [Andrea] Stagnaro, did a midnight flit to France en route to South American safety.

South Americans were not alone in playing inter-war mix and match. The collapse of the Habsburg Empire created half a dozen new states whose 50 million people bore

Diaspora...Morocco have risen to the top of the world game with a host of foreign-born players

> The 2026 World Cup featured no fewer than 99 players born in France. The 76 beyond *Les Bleus* represented 11 other nations

little or no personal loyalty. One such was the great Josef "Pepi" Bican. He was born in Habsburg Vienna in 1913 of ethnic-Czech parents, rose to stardom with Rapid Vienna then took formal Czech citizenship after transferring to Slavia Prague in 1937.

Bican scored 14 goals in 19 internationals for Austria, 12 goals in 14 for Czechoslovakia then six in two appearances for the short-lived Bohemia & Moravia after Germany's war machine carved new states out of eastern Europe. Greater Germany's swallowing of Austria created a new class of double internationals. Nine Austrians were in Sepp Herberger's squad at the 1938 World Cup.

One 1938 star was Ernest Wilimowski who scored four goals in Poland's dramatic 6-5 defeat to Brazil. After the invasion of Poland in 1939, Wilimowski's family background rendered him ethnic *Volksdeutsche*. He scored 13 goals in eight games for Greater Germany between 1941 and 1942. After the war, the Poles expunged all record of his career.

Post-war chaos included Laszlo/Ladislav/Ladislao Kubala playing for three countries: Czechoslovakia (family), Hungary (birthplace) and Spain (naturalised refugee). Italy, meanwhile, happily called up *"oriundi"* such as Argentinians Omar Sivori, Humberto Maschio and Antonio Valentin Angelillo, the famous "Angels with Dirty Faces" of 1957 Copa America fame.

Sivori played for Italy at the 1962 World Cup in Chile along with striker Jose Altafini who, under the nickname of Mazzola (for his similarity to the tragic 1940s Italian star), had helped Brazil win the 1958 World Cup in Sweden. FIFA, finally, started to close the net.

Subsequent World Cup failures by Italy and Spain led both countries to ban further player imports in the late 1960s and 1970s. Yet Spanish clubs continued mining dubious family histories to beat the ban. Not only that but Spain called up Real Madrid's Argentinian Roberto Martinez, who scored two goals in five internationals. Portugal looked to African colonial imports such as the great Eusebio (Mozambique) and Jose Aguas (Angola) and later Brazilians (notably Pepe and Deco, among others).

Ireland offered a unique anomaly. Some 45 footballers played for both Northern Ireland as well as the Irish Free State (later Eire then the Republic of Ireland) between 1924 and 1950. Remarkably, four players appeared for both in the 1950 World Cup qualifiers alone.

More recently the simultaneous collapse of both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia wreaked further fragmentation. At least 48 Soviet internationals went on to play for Europe's new nations; Akhrik Tsveiba lined up for both Ukraine and Russia, and Andrey Pyatnitsky played for the USSR (including CIS), Uzbekistan and Russia. It was a similar situation for 33 stars of the former Yugoslavia, including four members of their World Cup squad at Italia '90 who later represented Croatia at France '98.

Since then, FIFA's regulatory doors have been pushed wider by African FAs' delight in raiding overstocked European academies. A player can switch if he/she has played no more than three competitive games for their original nation, all by the age of 21, and never in a major finals. Hence the 2026 World Cup featured no fewer than 99 players born in France. The 76 beyond *Les Bleus* represented 11 other nations, reflecting both the depth of its academy system as well as post-colonial immigration.

Even FIFA appears to be giving up on policing its own rules. Lionel Mpasi kept goal for France at Under-17 level and then for the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers and finals. Yet it has been reported that he never finalised the essential paperwork to allow him to complete the process of switching nationalities; in that case DR Congo should never have reached the finals let alone played in them.

So what is a national team today? For FIFA president Gianni Infantino it's a narrow artifice to generate more competitions, more matches and more money for distribution and loyalty-generation around the world. From a wider standpoint it demonstrates the ability of football, amid unprecedented population movement due to climate change, war and personal desperation, to adapt to changing times.

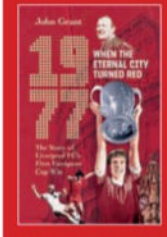
The notion of the old national team is dead, long live the new.

Émigré sons...Italy's World Cup-winning team of 1934 featured several Argentine-born players

BOOKS THIS MONTH

FUNNY OLD GAME
By Alan Ferguson (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

Funny Old Game: The Most Bizarre and Amusing Tales from the World of Football is a compelling collection of over 200 hilarious stories from Britain and around the world, from across the sport's history. Filled with fun anecdotes, bizarre records and tons of trivia, it uncovers the weirder side of the beautiful game. Easy to read and unputdownable, this is a book for all football fans.



1977, WHEN THE ETERNAL CITY TURNED RED
By John Grant (Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

1977 is the definitive story of the famous night when Liverpool lifted the European Cup for the first time. Author John Grant gets the inside track from legendary players, their families, their German opponents, the press and ordinary fans. Nostalgic, moving, and at times funny, this evocative and informative account is a must-read.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

The absurd imbalances of modern football

Everyone in football needs greater financial distribution – even the super clubs

Looking at the candidates to win the Ballon d'Or, trying to work out who deserved to win, perhaps the most striking element was how difficult it is to assess achievements across domestic leagues. This is the great failing of modern European football; many top-flight leagues are no longer challenging for the one or two elite sides who bestride them.

Harry Kane scored 61 goals in 51 games for Bayern Munich in 2025-26, a remarkable record, especially so for a player who often drops deeps and is highly adept at bringing others into play. But, even though he also hit 14 goals in 13 Champions League games, it's very hard to know how impressive that is. Yes, he got to 100 goals for Bayern faster than anybody else in the club's history, but he did so in an era in which extraordinary goalscoring feats have almost become routine. Which is not really to criticise Kane – he also scored 12 goals for England in 2026, six of them at the World Cup when, almost singlehandedly, he dragged his nation to victory over DR Congo in the last 32 – it's more to point out the absurd imbalances in the modern game.

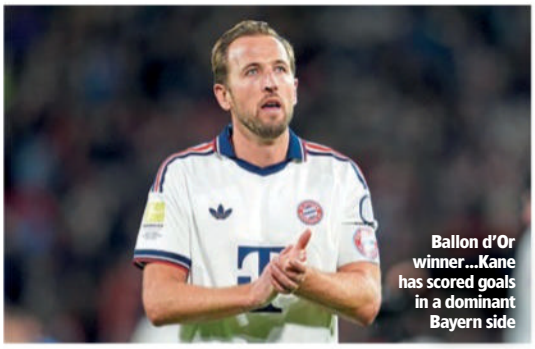
Statement win... PSG beat Barca 4-2 in October

Barca are obviously a very good side going forward, and may win La Liga, but Hansi Flick's team are far too open to be considered serious challengers for the Champions League. Nothing in Flick's history suggests he is willing or able to make the changes that might make Barca more solid. Yet very few people around the club are really willing to countenance the changes needed to make them a great side again. They reel off the big wins, everybody pretends it matters, and just hope that somehow this time it might be different when they come to the biggest games against the best opponents. But this isn't even really a tactical issue at heart; the best way for Barcelona to become case-hardened to playing in proper games is to play more of them – which is to say, to reduce the dominance they and Real Madrid, and to a lesser extent Atletico, hold over the rest of Spanish football. The wealth needs to be redistributed more evenly, for the good of everybody including the super clubs.

> Barcelona are obviously a very good side going forward, but they are far too open to be considered serious challengers for the Champions League

Consider Barcelona this campaign, who won their first 11 games of the season, scoring 48 goals. It all looked very thrilling. But frankly, so what? Scoring five against Elche or Rayo Vallecano or even Feyenoord is all very well, but it doesn't mean a team is able to compete. In their tenth game they faced Paris Saint-Germain – and lost, 4-2. Then they faced Real Madrid. Jose Mourinho may be well past his best but he can still set up a team to defend and catch a side as defensively shambolic as Barcelona on the break. Barcelona lost, 2-1.

Paris Saint-Germain offer an even more extreme example. Their budget is five times higher than that of the next wealthiest club in the league, Lyon. They win Ligue 1 without breaking sweat. Players can be rested for more important fixtures



Ballon d'Or winner...Kane has scored goals in a dominant Bayern side

in the Champions League. Last season nine Arsenal players played more than 2,000 minutes of league football; only three PSG players did, of whom only Vitinha started the Champions League final. The Portugal midfielder had played fewer minutes than eight of those Arsenal players and only two minutes more than Leandro Trossard – and that's before you take into account the fact that a minute in the Premier League is far harder than a minute while cruising against Metz or Nantes.

Once, the lack of a test seemed to count against PSG – as it is now counting against Barcelona – but as the global calendar has become increasingly crowded, their freshness is now one of their greatest weapons. Why can't a Premier League forward line play with the *élan* and verve of Desire Doue, Ousmane Dembele and Khvicha Kvataskhelia? Because they're exhausted having played almost twice as much football.

How then can you compare the achievements of PSG's dashing superstars with the players of similar ability that the Premier League turns into honest toilers, the relentless quality of the opposition making every game a potential slog? It's almost impossible. Returning from injury, Rodri didn't impose himself particularly for Manchester City last season, then was outstanding for Spain at the World Cup. The Premier League's remorselessness simply grinds everybody down.

But that too, of course, is a question of finance. For all its many flaws and the rank short-termism of many clubs, the Premier League is rich enough to buy up enough talent to create an environment probably even more exhausting than Serie A in the 1990s, when a similar dynamic played out: seven successive Champions League finals with an Italian team but fatigue meant five of them lost.

Greater redistribution would benefit everybody, would make the product better, would make teams tougher, but self-interest means it will never happen. The Premier League will remain excellent but exhausting, and super clubs will mop up elsewhere.

Nicolo TRESOLDI

(Club Brugge & Germany)

If there wasn't already an international tug of war for Tresoldi before his hat-trick for Club Brugge against Internazionale at the San Siro in October, there certainly is one now.

The 22-year-old striker was born on Sardinia but moved to Germany at 13, joining Hannover's academy. He has since scored 16 goals in 27 caps for Germany's Under-21s, including at last year's European Championship, and is set (they hope) to lead the line again in the 2027 edition. Italy's federation will be aiming to convince him to switch international allegiance before then, as may Argentina, where his mother hails from.

His combination of strength and technique is reminiscent of former France striker Olivier Giroud, highly adept at receiving the ball with his back to goal, laying it off and then getting into the box. His showreel of goals reveals a highly accomplished finisher and, when necessary, an unorthodox one too, able to convert from awkward situations.

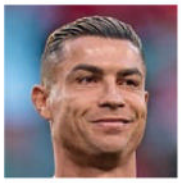
Belgian champions Club Brugge signed Tresoldi from second-tier Hannover in the summer of 2025, and he scored 23 goals in all competitions in his debut season. His reputation, it seems, is only set to grow.

Kai ROONEY
(Manchester United & England)
The 16-year-old son of Wayne recently made his debut for the Red Devils' Under-21s. Then, on his return to United's Under-18 side, he smashed home four goals in one game.

Bambase CONTE
(Hoffenheim & Germany)
Having only played 11 Bundesliga matches, the 23-year-old midfielder was a shock call-up to Jurgen Klopp's first Germany squad but looks set to stay after some impressive cameos.

Rabbi MATONDO
(Hibernian & Wales)
Once seen as the next Gareth Bale, Matondo was recently signed by Hibs as a free agent and tasked with helping them fight relegation.

Alphadjo CISSE
(Milan & Italy)
Cisse became the youngest Italian to score a hat-trick in European competition, doing so against Red Bull Salzburg in the Europa League a week before his 20th birthday.



"To the Portuguese people, the day has come for me to hand back the number seven shirt of our national team…a journey that began in August 2003 and changed my life forever has come to an end"

Portugal's all-time record scorer and appearance-maker Cristiano Ronaldo announces his retirement from international football

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month…

4
UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin is set to stand for a fourth term as the head of European football.

1
Games that former Manchester City and Spain playmaker David Silva will play for Sha Tin, the Hong Kong club that the 40-year-old signed for in early October.

36
Champions League goals scored by Harry Kane since turning 30, overtaking the previous record held by Lionel Messi.

19
Teams that will take part in the inaugural FIFA Women's Club World Cup in January 2028 hosted by the United States. Eight teams – Arsenal, Barcelona, Gotham FC, America, Corinthians, Cruzeiro, Naegohyang and Wuhan Jiangda – have already been confirmed.

8
Seconds it took for Augsburg's Robin Fellhauer to score against Bayern Munich in October, the fastest goal in Bundesliga history.

Rapid goal …Fellhauer celebrates his early strike

17
Years since East Belfast club Glentoran last won a league title, with the 23-time Northern Irish champions turning to Duncan Ferguson as their new coach.

Cupset…Fleetwood players celebrate their penalty-shootout win

84
League places between Arsenal and Fleetwood Town when the League Two side sensationally knocked the Premier League champions out of the EFL Cup.

2
Years that Africa Cup of Nations tournaments will be separated by after CAF made a U-turn on plans to move the competition to a four-year cycle.

4
Goals scored by former Burnley and Manchester United striker Wout Weghorst in FC Twente's 9-0 victory over Excelsior, the biggest Eredivisie win in the Enschede club's history.

2030
Year that Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta's new contract at the Emirates will expire.

133
International caps won for Finland by Teemu Pukki, who announced his retirement from the game aged 36. Only Jari Litmanen has been capped more often for the country than their all-time top goalscorer.

8
Head coaches that Sampdoria have had in the past two years, after 55-year-old Luca D'Angelo was hired to replace Bernardo Corradi with the club again fighting to avoid relegation from the Italian second tier.

33
Age of former West Bromwich Albion, Stoke City and England Under-21 striker Saido Berahino, who announced his retirement from playing in order to focus on a coaching role with the Burundi national team, whom he won 18 senior international caps for.

67
Career hat-tricks scored by Cristiano Ronaldo after he netted three goals against Al Kholood in the Saudi Pro League.

Hat-trick hero… Cristiano Ronaldo

127
Wins Luis Enrique clocked up as head coach of Paris Saint-Germain to set a new record for the European champions.

50
Real Madrid goals scored by Jude Bellingham after the England midfielder brought up the landmark with a strike against Racing Santander.

146
International goals scored by Cristiano Ronaldo – more than anyone in men's football history.

More to follow on Ronaldo's iconic Portugal career in January's issue

2
Years that Cesc Fabregas has managed Como, making him the longest-serving head coach in Serie A after five sackings at the start of the new season.

28
Points Harry Kane pipped Kylian Mbappe by to win the 2026 Ballon d'Or award – the smallest winning margin since Leo Messi edged out Virgil van Dijk to win the prize in 2019.

4
English clubs that Scott Parker has managed during his career after he replaced Nuno Espirito Santo as West Ham head coach.

11
Months that the 2027 Asian Cup will be delayed after safety concerns for the host nation Saudi Arabia. The tournament, originally scheduled to begin on January 7, will now kick off on December 23, 2027.

Full analysis of the AFC's decision to follow in next month's issue

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"Heartbroken, with a lump in our throats and unable to believe this is true, CD Tenerife announces the tragic death of Jesus de Miguel Alameda"

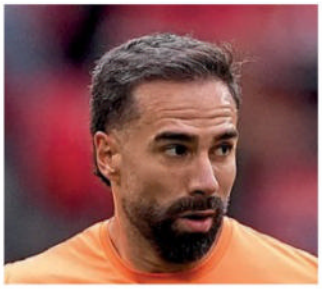
Tenerife announce the death of their 30-year-old striker following a collision in a Spanish second-division match

12 MOVES *you might have missed…*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

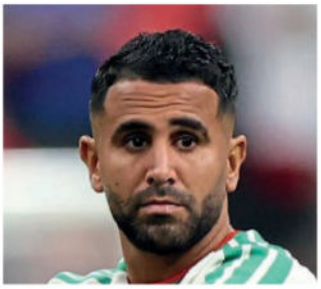
PEDRO

The ex-Barcelona, Chelsea, Roma and **Spain** winger retired at the age of 39. The World Cup winner had been without a club since leaving Lazio at the end of last season.



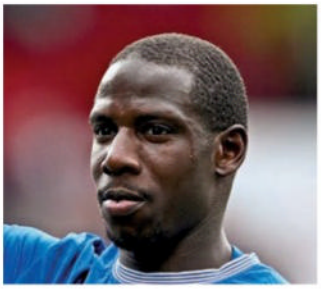
Dani CARVAJAL

Following the expiration of his Real Madrid contract last summer, the right-back moved to **Getafe**. On his debut v Athletic Club, he was booed relentlessly by the Bilbao crowd.



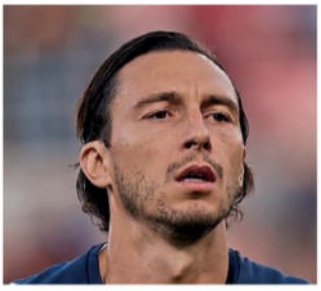
Riyad MAHREZ

Three months on from exiting Saudi Pro League side Al Ahli, the former Algeria and Manchester City winger opted to stay in the Middle East and join Qatari outfit **Al Shamal**.



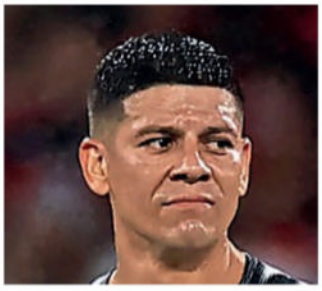
Abdoulaye DOUCOURE

The former Mali, Watford and Everton midfielder, 33, joined MLS side Charlotte FC, having spent the past year playing for **Neom SC** in Saudi Arabia.



Matteo DARMIAN

The former Manchester United and Italy full-back joined **Bologna** as a free agent, having been released by Serie A champions Internazionale at the end of the 2025-26 season.

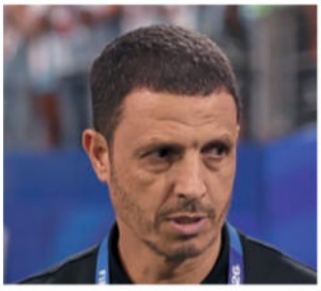


Marcos ROJO

Rojo returned to **Estudiantes** just ahead of their Copa Libertadores semi-final victory over Flamengo. The defender was at the club when they won their last Copa in 2009.

Dirk KUYT

In July, the Dutchman was hired as **Fenerbahce**'s assistant coach, the club he scored 37 goals for as a player. After Ismail Kartal resigned, Kuyt took caretaker charge.



Jamal SELLAMI

In his first role since leading Jordan to the World Cup, the Moroccan coach took charge of Saudi Pro League side **Al Fateh**, who are in a relegation battle.

Vincenzo MONTELLA

Under pressure after an early World Cup exit, the Italian was fired after **Turkey** lost their first four games of the 2026-27 UEFA Nations League and replaced by Sergen Yalcin.

Clarence SEEDORF

In his first coaching role since leaving Cameroon in 2019, the Champions League-winning midfielder replaced Fernando Diniz as head coach of Brazilian side **Corinthians**.

Davide NICOLA

After sacking Giovanni Stroppa, **Venezia** hired a survival specialist. In the last decade, Nicola has led Crotone, Salernitana, Genoa, Torino, Empoli and Cagliari to Serie A safety.

Kim BJORKEGREN

As **Ghana** continued to search for a new head coach following Carlos Queiroz's departure, they turned to the boss of their women's national team as caretaker manager.

OCTOBER 2026

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

David Raya (Arsenal)	4
Bart Verbruggen (Brighton)	3
Gianluigi Donnarumma (Man City)	2
Alisson (Liverpool)	1
Elia Caprile (Cagliari)	1
Diogo Costa (Porto)	1
Matias Dituro (Elche)	1
Dominik Greif (Lyon)	1
Matvey Safonov (PSG)	1
Mile Svilar (Roma)	1

DEFENDERS

Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	7
Gabriel (Arsenal)	5
Alex Grimaldo (Atletico Madrid)	5
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	4
Mario Hermoso (Roma)	3
Nuno Tavares (Lazio)	3
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	2
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	2
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	2
Jacobo Ramon (Como)	2
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	2
Luka Vuskovic (Brighton)	2
Waldemar Anton (B. Dortmund)	1
Ronald Araujo (Liverpool)	1
Zachary Athekame (Lyon)	1
Carlos Augusto (Internazionale)	1
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	1
Joao Cancelo (Barcelona)	1
Marc Cucurella (Real Madrid)	1
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	1
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	1
Miguel Gutierrez (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
David Hancko (Atletico Madrid)	1
Dean Huijsen (Real Madrid)	1
Jeremy Jacquet (Liverpool)	1
Abdukodir Khusanov (Man City)	1
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	1
Evan Ndicka (Roma)	1
Oliver Provstgaard (Lazio)	1
Marc Pubill (Atletico Madrid)	1
Cristian Romero (Atletico Madrid)	1
Julian Ryerson (B. Dortmund)	1
Jonathan Tah (Bayern Munich)	1
Adrien Truffert (Bournemouth)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	8
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	5
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	5
Rodri (Barcelona)	4
Pascal Gross (Brighton)	3
Enzo Fernandez (Manchester City)	2
Arda Guler (Real Madrid)	2
Nico Paz (Como)	2
Vitinha (PSG)	2
Elliot Anderson (Manchester City)	1
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Martin Baturina (Como)	1
Lamine Camara (Monaco)	1
Rayan Cherki (Manchester City)	1
Gustav Isaksen (Lazio)	1
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	1
Manu Kone (Roma)	1
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	1
Pedri (Barcelona)	1
Fabin Ruiz (PSG)	1
Kenneth Taylor (Lazio)	1
Denis Zakaria (Monaco)	1

FORWARDS

Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	12
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	8
Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	8
Raphinha (Barcelona)	7
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	4
Donyell Malen (Roma)	3
Desire Doue (PSG)	2
Ferran Torres (PSG)	2
Alex Baena (Atletico Madrid)	1
Yan Diomande (Real Madrid)	1
Niclas Fullkrug (Werder Bremen)	1
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	1
Goncalo Ramos (Milan)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

OBITUARIES

Prolific forward ...Peter Dobing

Peter DOBING (1938–2026)
Outstanding inside-forward who captained Stoke City to League Cup success against Chelsea in 1972. Made his name at Blackburn Rovers, where 20 goals in 1957–58 helped earn promotion. The following year he scored a season-best 24 league goals, and in 1959–60 his five FA Cup goals helped fire Rovers to the final where they lost to Wolves.

In 1961, he moved to Manchester City as a replacement for Torino-bound Denis Law. After City's relegation in 1962–63, Dobing joined Stoke for a then club-record fee of £37,500. He played a key role in the team put together by manager Tony Waddington in support of Sir Stanley Matthews.

Dobing hit 95 goals in 377 games in a decade with the Potters before retiring after a leg fracture. Unlucky never to play for England after scoring once in eight appearances for the Under-23s.

Georgi NEMSADZE (1972–2026)
Georgia midfielder who won five league titles and four cups with Dinamo Tbilisi. Moved on to Germany (Homburg), Turkey (Trabzonspor), Switzerland (Grasshopper), Italy (Reggiana) and Scotland (Dundee). Won 69 caps for Georgia between 1992 and 2004, captaining them 42 times.

Yiorgos VARDINOGIANNIS (1936–2026)
Served as president of Panathinaikos for more than two decades until stepping down in May 2000, during which time the club won six league titles and nine cups.

Caupolican PENA (1930–2026)
Spent his entire playing career at Chilean club Colo-Colo with whom he won three league titles and one cup between 1951 and 1962. Won 15 caps mainly at right-back and was president of the Chilean players' union between 1960 and 1962 before an extensive coaching career that took in a host of clubs, including Palestino with whom he won the title in 1978. Pena also managed Chile in the 1978 World Cup qualifiers. They failed, amid controversy, to qualify for the finals in neighbouring Argentina after Pena omitted star forward Carlos Caszely.

Denmark boss... Bo Johansson

Jean Manga ONGUENE (1946–2026)
A Cameroonian football great. Onguene spent his entire senior club career at Canon Yaounde, winning three African Champions Cups, one Cup Winners' Cup, six domestic titles and six cups. He was the league's 22-goal top scorer in 1976 and African Footballer of the Year in 1980. Onguene won more than 50 international caps between 1967 and 1981 – including at the 1970 and 1972 Africa Cup of Nations – before a knee injury prevented him playing for the Indomitable Lions on their World Cup debut in 1982. Later managed Cameroon at the 1998 AFCON finals.

Bo JOHANSSON (1942–2026)
Swedish coach who worked in Greece and Finland, managed Iceland and then Denmark between 1996 and 2000, leading them to the 1998 World Cup quarter-finals. Later coached IFK Gothenburg and Norway's Molde.

Ilie DATCU (1937–2026)
Romanian goalkeeper who joined Fenerbahce from Dinamo Bucharest in 1969. In his first campaign he conceded just six goals in 30 league matches – a record that still stands today – on his way to winning the first of three league titles in five years at the club. Also won 13 caps for Romania before moving into coaching.

Georgia international ...Georgi Nemsadze

Eduardo VILARETE (1953–2026)
Hit seven goals in 21 caps for Colombia between 1976 and 1985, including the 1979 Copa America. Scored freely for Atletico Bucaramanga then moved to Union Magdalena, before winning three titles in two spells with Atletico Nacional.

John VAUGHAN (1964–2026)
Goalkeeper whose 18-year career took in five seasons at Cambridge United, which included consecutive promotions. Also starred for Preston North End and Lincoln City, and had served as Sheffield United's head of academy goalkeeping since 2022.

"Mr Arsenal" ...Ken Friar

Ken FRIAR (1934–2026)
Known as "Mr Arsenal", a Gunners loyalist behind the scenes for 70 years. Joined as a messenger boy in 1950, worked his way up to club secretary in 1973 then managing director from 1983 to 2000. Continued as a director and played a key role in the club's stadium move.

George GILLETT (1938–2026)
American businessman who acquired Liverpool with Texan millionaire Tom Hicks in 2007. The Reds went trophyless during their tenure, before the club was bought by Fenway Sports Group in 2010.

Doug LOFT (1986–2026)
Midfielder who captained Port Vale and Gillingham, winning promotion from League Two with the former.

Per HAFTORSEN (1947–2026)
Norway goalkeeper, winning 12 caps between 1969 and 1972 and considered one of Haugesund's finest players. His son Per Andreas and daughter Synnove both appeared in age-group internationals for Norway, while his granddaughter Libe Haftorsen Brakstad played at senior level.

Roman MAKSYMIUK (1974–2026)
Ukraine international midfielder who was killed while serving the country's armed forces. Disappeared in January 2025 in Donetsk but was not confirmed as having died in action until this autumn. Won the Russian Cup with Zenit in 1999 then the Ukrainian league with Dynamo Kyiv a year later. Played five times for Ukraine between 1998 and 2002.

David MILLER (1935–2026)
Leading British sports journalist with *The Times*, *Telegraph* and *Daily Express*. His 18 books included an official Olympic Games history plus biographies of IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch, Sir Matt Busby and Sir Stanley Matthews.

William OSORIO (1971–2026)
El Salvador defender who won 67 caps between 1991 and 2002 while winning six league titles with domestic giants FAS.

Joseph YEGBA MAYA (1944–2026)
One of Marseille's leading marksmen with 103 goals in 202 league matches between 1962 and 1970 after arriving in France aged 16. He won the French Cup with OM in 1969, scoring in the 2-0 win over Bordeaux. Hit a further 63 goals in three seasons with Valenciennes, while his ten-year international career included helping Cameroon finish third at the 1972 AFCON finals.

Jacek ZIOBER (1965–2026)
Polish Footballer of the Year in 1990 before leaving hometown LKS Lodz after eight seasons for three years in France with Montpellier, winning the French League Cup in 1992. Spent a further three seasons with Osasuna in Spain before short spells with Amica Wronki then Tampa Bay Mutiny in MLS. Scored eight goals in 46 games for Poland between 1988 and 1993.

Words by Keir Radnedge & Mark Gleeson

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eye witness

Lee Wingate reports

ALBANIA

The Tirana derby

October's clash between FK Partizani and KF Tirana provided another chaotic chapter in the recent story of Albanian football and its capital city

It is a troubling time for the people of Tirana, the city of over 500,000 people that serves as Albania's capital.

The local mayor, Erion Veliaj, is currently in pre-trial detention amid investigations over allegations of corruption and financial crime, which he denies. Then in October, the city was plunged into further chaos by a series of protests. What began as peaceful, environmental demonstrations soon grew into a larger movement against education costs and alleged government corruption. It also became violent, with protesters setting a government building and two banks alight.

In among all this heightened tension, a local derby between two of the capital city's football clubs, FK Partizani and KF Tirana, added an extra dose of fuel to the flames.

In the lead-up to the game, supporters armed with flares were filmed attacking each other near the ground, putting the police on high alert outside the stadium. There were 400 officers on duty at the game, a ratio of roughly one for every 20 spectators.

"The derbies are more controlled than they used to be," veteran Albanian football journalist Ermal Kuka tells *World Soccer*. "It used to get violent in the stands. Now there are too many police officers around for that.

"A few years ago, the fans had a fight in the middle of the pitch – at the other stadium, not this one," adds Kuka, referring to the recently-built Arena Kombetare, which as well as the Albanian national team also hosts a selection of big club games, including this one. "Since they have moved it here, they aren't allowing them to do that. Why should they destroy a beautiful new stadium?"

Electric atmosphere...Partizani supporters watch their team in action *Credit: FK Partizani*

Also known as the Air Albania Stadium (despite the national carrier that bought the naming rights ceasing operations at the end of last year), the Arena Kombetare was built at a cost of €85 million and inaugurated in 2019. It has a 112m-tall tower housing a Marriott Hotel in one corner and is decorated with 3,200 aluminium sunshades in the red and black colours of Albania that light up spectacularly at night.

During the week it serves as a social hub, with locals chatting at the cafes and restaurants lining the octagon-shaped venue, which is loosely inspired by Albania's geographic outline. Interspersed among the bars and eateries, there is a huge range of services on offer, with places to buy washing machines, hire a yacht, or even book a hair transplant.

But on matchdays like this one, any thought of socialising and shopping goes out the window. It is derby day – and there are bragging rights at stake.

The capital duo are among the most successful clubs in Albanian football with a combined 43 league titles – the last of which came in 2022-23, when Partizani dramatically pipped Tirana to the title on their head-to-head record.

But their fortunes have waned in the intervening three years – a decline that has coincided with experimental shifts in the format of the Kategoria Superiore, the country's top flight.

In the summer of 2023, the Albanian FA introduced a knockout tournament to determine the league champions. After 36 rounds – during which the ten teams would all play each other home and away twice – the top four would contest one-legged semi-finals and a final to crown the winners.

Upended...two players collide during the Tirana derby
Credit: KF Tirana

"It was the stupidest idea in football," says Kuka, "because it erased what you had been doing all year and you had a clean break. As long as you got into the top four, you had a chance. You could be rubbish all year, finish fourth and then win it in two matches."

Since then there have been more tweaks – although Egnatia have still managed to win three titles in a row – with another new format arriving for 2026-27.

"They've changed it to be like the Greek system, where the top six will compete for the title," explains Kuka. Specifically, the teams will now play each other three times for a total of 27 matches before the league splits and all the points tallies are halved. The top six will then face off to decide the title and the European places, while the bottom four will battle to avoid relegation.

Even with the new format, the old chaos remains. Vllaznia from the north-western city of Shkoder, who finished top of the regular season last term, have financial problems that led to reported delays in salary payments and a backlash from the squad.

"The players recently responded by boycotting training because they had not been paid for more than four months," says Kuka. "That same day, the club said: 'You either go to training or you get fined!' The players did not go to training and got fined 15% of their monthly wages, which they were not being paid anyway. The next day, they showed up for training."

> "We became the black sheep of European football"
>
> **Albanian football journalist Ermal Kuka**

Meanwhile, newly-promoted Skenderbeu are still serving the longest ban in UEFA history. Just a decade ago, the club from the south-eastern city of Korce were the country's dominant force. But in 2016, as the dust settled on their sixth successive title celebrations, they were found guilty of match-fixing and suspended from European competition for the 2016-17 season.

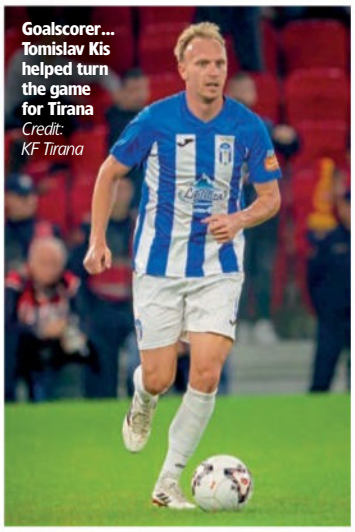
With that ban served, they returned to Europe in 2017-18 – only for further match-fixing to come to light. UEFA's Betting Fraud Detection System identified 53 games involving Skenderbeu, with a leaked UEFA report in 2018 describing the club as: "fixing football matches like nobody has ever done before in the history of the game".

The upshot was that Skenderbeu were hit with a ten-year ban, which expires in 2028, and fined €1m. The Court of Arbitration for Sport dismissed Skenderbeu's appeal, judging the sanctions "proportionate and justified."

The impact of the scandal is still being felt across the whole of Albania today.

"We became the black sheep [of European football]," says Kuka. "The moment the verdict came, all betting markets withdrew from Albanian football. You would think that's a good thing, but that was a source of income. So wages fell, the quality of the championship fell, everything fell. The moment

Arena Kombetare... Albania's national stadium hosted the Tirana derby



Goalscorer... Tomislav Kis helped turn the game for Tirana *Credit: KF Tirana*

Derby clash ... Partizani skipper Xhuliano Skuka vies for the ball with Tirana's Basilio Ndong *Credit: FK Partizani*

Skenderbeu fell, the system collapsed."

The decline of Skenderbreu left a void at the top of Albanian football that both Partizani and Tirana would like to occupy, but have not been able to.

Inside the Arena Kombetare, flares are set off and tifos are revealed as the two teams take to the pitch. Partizani's ultras unfurl a huge banner set against a khaki-and-red background that reveals the words "National Army," a nod to their military roots. Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the stadium, the die-hard Tirana supporters profess their love for the club with a choreo that translates as: "Until our dying breath".

It is the latter group of fans who have the first moment to cherish when Redon Xhixha opens the scoring in the seventh minute. The Tirana captain's left-footed strike from outside the box escapes the outstretched arms of Partizani keeper Pano Qirko and nestles in the bottom corner of the goal.

But Partizani soon respond. First, they strike the woodwork via Altin Aliu's curling effort on the quarter-hour mark, and eventually pull themselves level through Elson Himallari in the 36th minute following great build-up work from Xhuliano Skuka on the right side of the box, leaving the match finely poised ahead of the second period.

As the crowd munch on sunflower seeds – the football snack of choice in Albania and much of southern Europe – they are treated to a blistering resumption after the break: shots hit the post, tackles come flying in and fireworks shoot into the night sky from the stands.

Partizani have a brilliant chance to go in front when Rowan Human shoots agonisingly wide from close range – and they are made to rue it. Bojan Ilievski and substitute Tomislav Kis, in the 79th and 85th minutes respectively, ultimately see Tirana pull away to a decisive lead and a 3-1 victory.

"It was a lively affair, much more than it has been in recent years," says Kuka after the final whistle. "Usually you see a lot of things happening by chance and unforced errors by both sides. But at least this one had a lot of chances, goals and was a pretty lively match to watch."

And what about the crowd, which numbered around 8,000 and barely filled the bottom tier of the Arena Kombetare?

"There used to be a much better atmosphere," says Kuka, "but the decline in the quality of football meant that people wouldn't enjoy the match.

"The fan groups would obviously go, but the others just wanted to see a football match and they were not seeing that on the pitch. That's why there are fewer people than you might expect.

"Three or four years ago, there were 20,000 people watching the derby here. That's a huge drop-off in a short time. Usually, that would happen over ten or 20 years."

But as the anti-government protests show, once disillusionment takes hold in Albania, things can move very quickly indeed.

Decisive...Tirana celebrate after Tomislav Kis' late penalty seals the victory *Credit: Lee Wingate*

eye witness

Tom Kundert reports

PORTUGAL

What's in the water in Torres Vedras?

Torreense, the Portuguese second-tier club, take their remarkable first steps into European competition

Support...Torreense fans had to travel almost 100km to watch their side's first European home match

"It's madness. Unthinkable ten years ago."

So says Luis Cristovao, one of Portugal's leading TV, radio and print football journalists. He also happens to have been born and bred in Torres Vedras, the small town 50 kilometres north of Lisbon and home of Torreense.

"A decade ago, the stadium was almost empty, with just a few fans watching the team play in the fourth tier. To go from that to the experience of winning the Portuguese Cup, playing in the Super Cup and winning games in the Europa League – it's authentic madness."

Torreense shot to prominence in the football world when they beat Sporting in last May's Portuguese Cup final, a monumental shock that made them the first lower-league team to win the competition in its entire 85-year history.

What is less well known are the big strides forward being taken by an eclectic club on an upward trajectory. At the time of writing, Torreense's women, who finished third in the national league last campaign, were leading the way in the new season, leaving powerhouses Benfica, Sporting, Porto and Braga in their wake, and going strong in the UEFA Women's Europa Cup (the equivalent to the Europa League in the men's game). The club also has formidable futsal teams in both the men and women's leagues.

Recently, plans were unveiled to completely renovate their Estadio Manuel Marques home to increase the stadium capacity, improve comfort for the fans, unlock revenue streams through hospitality options and enable the club to host its home matches in UEFA competitions.

Naturally, though, it is the fairy-tale of the men's team that has caught the

Opening goal... Torreense's Volnei Feltes celebrates after scoring v Sunderland

Coach...Torreense boss Luis Tralhao instructs his players

imagination of the football world – especially as their cup triumph earned them a ticket to the Europa League. As such, Torreense are the only one of the 108 teams competing in the league phase of UEFA's three club competitions this season who play outside the top flight of their respective country's football pyramid.

But the club were determined they would not be there simply to make up the numbers. On their European bow, a highly disciplined and enterprising display in Norway led to a memorable 2-1 victory over Lillestrom, which was

all the more surprising given their poor start to the domestic campaign.

"In practice, it's impossible to go for two ambitious goals simultaneously: do well in Europe and fight for promotion to the Primeira Liga," says Cristovao. "It ended up being natural that the whole club has put all the emphasis on Europe. Also, truth be told, the team's style of play is suited to matches where the opponents dominate possession."

The opening-night victory set up their continental debut on home soil beautifully, albeit in a borrowed stadium of Leiria, around 100 kilometres north of Torres Vedras. For their opponents, Sunderland, it was also a seismic occasion, as they were making only their second foray into Europe and their first for over half a century.

Ironically, the last time and only previous occasion that Sunderland had qualified for Europe, it was as a second-division team thanks to a shock cup win, just like Torreense. The FA Cup triumph over Don Revie's Leeds United in 1973 earned the Black Cats a place in the Cup Winners' Cup. By another quirk of fate, their last away game in Europe had also been in Portugal as Sporting ended the campaign of Bob Stokoe's side with a 2-0 victory in Lisbon for a 3-2 aggregate win.

This time Sunderland travelled to Portugal as firm favourites, but Torreense were up to the task, giving the multi-million-pound English Premier League squad the fright of their lives when taking the lead late in the first half through a stupendous long-range strike by journeyman Brazilian centre-back Volnei Feltes.

Feltes, a summer signing from Greek outfit Panserraikos, was one of 19 new signings ahead of the 2026-27 season as the club sought to balance the demands of competing in Europe and pushing for promotion. Integrating all of the new faces has inevitably been a challenge for coach Luis Tralhao, who only took charge himself at the start of the year. A former coach in Benfica's academy, he arrived as Torreense's Under-23s boss in 2024 before being promoted midway through last season. By the end of the campaign, he had achieved immortality at the club.

Elsewhere in the squad, veteran centre-back Stopira, scorer of the decisive winning goal in May's cup

First European home game... Torreense's Manu Pozo brings the ball under his control

Temporary home... inside the borrowed Estadio Dr Magalhaes Pessoa in Leiria ahead of Torreense's clash with Sunderland

final, is still going strong at 38 years old. The club captain's role has been reduced to that of a substitute, just as he was for Cape Verde at the World Cup, and he was involved for the last half hour against Sunderland to help shore things up.

Sadly for Torreense, though, to no avail. Within four minutes of Stopira's introduction, the visitors had equalised through DR Congo midfielder Jules Ahoka. Then, in stoppage time, his international team-mate Noah Sadiki snatched a winner to cruelly deny the hosts a famous point.

The goals for Sunderland came only after coach Regis Le Bris had made a quadruple change, bringing on experienced campaigners Nordi Mukiele, Reinildo Mandava, Granit Xhaka and Enzo Le Fee.

"We knew it would be a very tough game. We can only be proud of what Torreense did today," said Carlos Simoes, Torreense's assistant manager. "We're frustrated and disappointed to lose, but extremely proud. We weren't playing against just any team and we forced Sunderland to empty their bench to turn around the game."

Torreense are the only one of the 108 teams competing in the league phase of UEFA's three club competitions this season who play outside the top flight

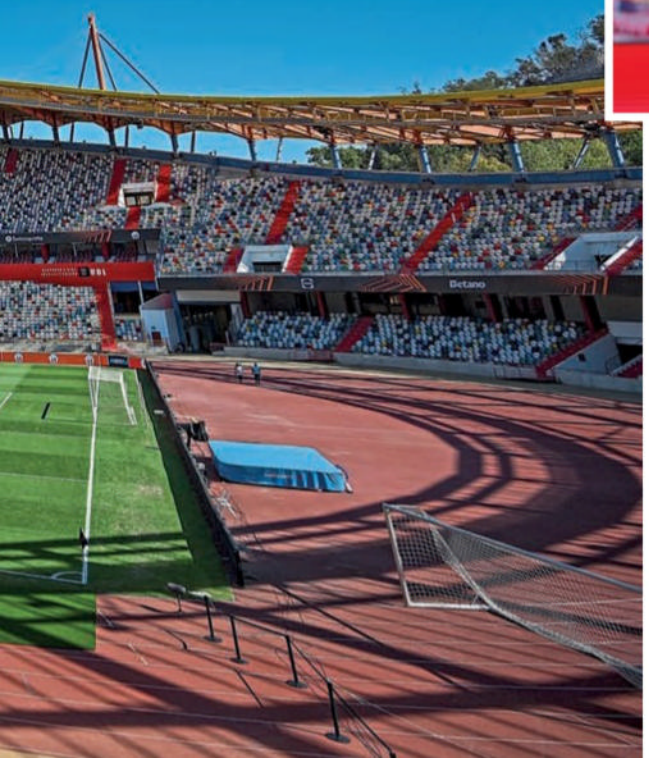
Midfielder Joao Marques could not hide his exasperation at how the match had ended. "It's so frustrating. Losing in the 93rd minute hurts, but we put in a very competitive display," said the former Portugal Under-21 midfielder. "We tried to stick to our game plan and we executed it well in the first half. Afterwards they made changes that allowed them to create different forms of attacking and we retreated too much."

Nevertheless, it was another magical night for the club, and the match will be talked about for generations by the local fans in attendance. "Just being here is incredible," said Torreense supporter Jose Oliveira after the full-time whistle. "We lost but we went toe-to-toe with a team from the English first division and scored an amazing goal. I'm proud to be a Torreense fan. Football in Portugal should not be just about the Big Three."

The result left Torreense in 17th place in the table, right in the middle of the Europa League pack. A 4-1 defeat to Ferencvaros in Hungary then followed, before a stunning 3-2 comeback win against Ararat-Armenia in Leiria. Down to ten men from the 25th minute after a red card for opening goalscorer Jorge Aguirre, Torreense sensationally netted two stoppage-time goals through captain Javi Vazquez and sub Musa Drammeh to snatch an unlikely victory from the jaws of defeat and keep their chances of qualifying for the knockout rounds alive.

The next visitors to Leiria at the end of November will be Celtic, who've won just one of their first four games. What started out as an impossible dream is turning into a thrilling reality for Torreense and their fans.

Aerial clash... Torreense captain Javi Vazquez vies for the ball with Sunderland's Luke O'Nien



Hosts' heartbreak...DR Congo midfielder Noah Sidiki after scoring Sunderland's stoppage-time winner

GIRONDIN
F
C

eye witness

Raphael Jucobin reports

FRANCE

Bordeaux live to fight another day

With new owners, the former Ligue 1 champions finally returned to action in the sixth tier of French football

The city centre was still somewhat shaken up from two weekends of protests and sparse rioting. On the tram ride from Bordeaux's train station, the boarded-up shop windows and ripped-out cobblestones were a physical testament to the recent tensions in the streets.

On the Saturday, October 24, thousands had marched (mostly) peacefully through the town centre, continuing the nationwide protests that had erupted at the start of October. But a day later the city's inhabitants were instead heading north, this time decked out in navy blue and white, and in a much cheerier mood despite the persistent drizzle.

A total of 11,163 supporters were in attendance for Bordeaux's first home game of the 2026-27 season at the Stade Atlantique, the 42,000-seater stadium built for Euro 2016. Initially they were due to face Stade Montois away from home, but the fixture was reversed and the club set ticket prices to €8 for the occasion.

Only a few years ago, when the *Marine et Blanc* were still in the top flight, they regularly tripled that figure. Nevertheless, given what the club has been through over the past few years, setting a new sixth-tier attendance record was an impressive show of loyalty. Once one of the familiar faces of the French top flight, with six league titles and 145 years of history to their name, the club experienced a dramatic fall down the divisions in the space of five seasons.

In the summer of 2021, amid a worsening financial situation after the previous owners pulled their financial backing, the club was bought by Spanish-Luxembourgish businessman Gerard Lopez.

His is a name that has become synonymous with dysfunctional spells presiding over football clubs across Europe – fellow French outfit Lille, Portugal's Boavista and Belgium's Royal Excel Mouscron, with the latter now liquidated – and he didn't fare any better at Bordeaux.

Their slide down the French football pyramid took place amid financial mismanagement (debts reached almost €100 million including transfer payments and stadium rent), missed opportunities (most notably a scrapped takeover by Liverpool owners FSG), and tensions at every level.

In the 2021-22 season, the club finished bottom of Ligue 1, conceding 91 goals in the process. *Les Girondins* then spent two seasons in the second

tier, before worsening finances saw them knocked down an extra two divisions by the French Football Federation's financial watchdog. In the summer, they were expelled from national-level leagues altogether and found themselves again on the verge of liquidation.

Along the way, the club's academy was shut down, 90% of its workforce laid off, and the women's team discarded. Throughout this time, the club's matches continued to be broadcast on local channel *TV7*.

Lopez eventually sold the club for a nominal fee of €1 to Park Bench, a US-based investment group who also own Scottish side Dunfermline Athletic. Along with reducing the club's debts, the new ownership's biggest task will be winning back disaffected supporters for good.

By the time the sale of the club and its battle with French football's governing bodies was settled, the Regional 1 Division was already four matches into the new campaign. For many fans, the early-October reception of Stade Montois was a first outing to see their team in a while.

"We've waited a long time to be back at the stadium," one supporter told *France 3*. "We're happy that the ordeal is over and we're starting fresh. We're finally talking about football again instead of business."

Most supporters were bunched into the south stand, from where the club's long-running Ultramarines group operate, forming an impressive navy blue wall behind the goal. "145 years of history, nothing will stop us," read one of several combative messages unfurled before kick-off. Another banner, which was held up as the players warmed up, paid tribute to the seven players who had remained at the club despite the two-division drop.

Several figures from the new management, including the club president Dominique Delport and Park Bench investor Jeremy Green, were in attendance. Evidently, the new decision-makers were proceeding with a degree of caution, opting not to make any public comment on their project until a commercial court hearing that was scheduled for the following week.

Bordeaux fans, meanwhile, were more than happy to momentarily forget about the courtroom battles, building up a raucous atmosphere well before kick-off. The festivities, though, were dulled 20 minutes in when Stade Montois opened the scoring from a counter-attack.

The hosts equalised from the penalty spot ten minutes later through centre-back Ruben Droehnle, one of the loyal holdouts from the previous campaign. The *Girondins* took the lead at the end of the half through forward Steve Shamal, who went on to complete his hat-trick shortly after the break. He saved the best until last, curling a shot into the top-right corner from the edge of the penalty box to make it 4-1 and put the match beyond the opposition.

The 30-year-old winger is among the *Marine et Blanc* players with the most top-level experience. Having played in Bordeaux's youth ranks, he went on to feature in Ligue 2 for Reims, Caen and Annecy before returning to his formative club at the start of last season. The squad, comfortably the most well-equipped in the division, also includes Almamy Toure, a Europa League winner with Eintracht Frankfurt as recently as 2022, as well as former Belgium youth striker Baptiste Guillaume.

"When you look at our dressing room, it's insane," Shamal said after the match. "Some of us have played in Ligue 1 or Ligue 2. We know we should be higher up, but that certainty can also be a trap. We shouldn't think that it's going to be easy. We need to respect our opponents if we're going to put in good performances."

Alongside those former top-level professionals is a supporting cast of local players, including 22-year-old forward Allan Diragbou. The law student, who only began playing football at club level four years ago, was awestruck on Sunday.

"Even in my wildest dreams, I couldn't have seen myself playing in front of that many people," Diragbou said after making his debut. "Bordeaux is such a massive deal in French football. To play for your hometown club is a dream for any amateur player in the Bordeaux area."

Bordeaux's illustrious history means they have a number of high-profile former players to call upon for help. In attendance at the game was former France left-back Benoit Tremoulinas, who was part of Bordeaux's last title-winning team in 2008-09.

> "We've been through a nightmare, but the club is still standing!"
>
> **Bordeaux legend Alain Giresse**

Icon...Alain Giresse played 592 games for the club
Credit: Arthur Lameaux, Girondins de Bordeaux

Match-winner...Steve Shamal after scoring one of his three goals
Credit: Arthur Lameaux, Girondins de Bordeaux

The 40-year-old retired in 2019 due to persistent knee injuries, but says that he will return to help out his former club this season. Another former player, Paul Baysse, has joined as Arnaud Cormier's assistant, having also briefly come out of retirement in 2024 to play for the club in the fourth tier.

The greatest Bordeaux player of all was also there to take the ceremonial kick-off. Alain Giresse, who played more games and scored more goals for the club than anyone, and led them to two title wins in the 1980s, gave a speech in the dressing room, and was joined in the stands by former team-mates Marius Tresor and Patrick Battiston.

"I wasn't surprised to see that kind of attendance," the 74-year-old later told *France TV*. "I know my region and I know the supporters. We've been through a nightmare, but the club is still standing! It's going to be a long and complicated road, but the club will have the healthy foundations now to get back on its feet progressively."

The players' celebrations in front of the south stand at full-time felt like a moment that had been years in the waiting. After a decade of mismanagement, fans will be wary of ambitious new owners, but there is an overarching sense of relief that the club's decline has been halted for now.

Talk of promotion will have to wait, not least because Bordeaux had several other matchdays to catch up on before drawing level with their rivals.

Head coach Cormier, who was hired at the start of October, is certainly not getting carried away, insisting his team was "far from top form," adding: "We need to be more clinical in front of goal if we're to get through this unusual start to the campaign."

For now, a humbling tour of the local grassroots scene awaits. Their opponents will range from clubs based in the immediate suburbs of the city (including the one right next to the stadium) to villages at the foothills of the Pyrenees to the south.

Bordeaux fans have shown that they will be there through thick and thin. It's now up to the new management to match that commitment and get *Les Girondins* back on their feet.

Winning return... Bordeaux players celebrate with their supporters
Credit: Arthur Lameaux, Girondins de Bordeaux

Homecoming... Bordeaux fans inside the Stade Atlantique

BRAZIL v ARGENTINA

After five all-Brazilian Copa Libertadores finals in the past six years, Argentina's Estudiantes are aiming to upset the Samba party v Palmeiras

Words: Tim Vickery

Everything seemed set up for yet another Flamengo v Palmeiras Copa Libertadores final, the third in six years. But back at the quarter-final stage there were hints it might not prove so straightforward.

Palmeiras collapsed towards the end of their trip to LDU Quito of Ecuador – conceding two goals in stoppage time – and had to go through via a penalty shootout, while Flamengo amazingly also found themselves in trouble against opponents from the same country.

It all seemed cut and dried when they beat Independiente del Valle 2-0 away from home in first leg. But they found themselves under immense pressure at home, going a goal down and having key midfielder Jorginho sent off.

Ultimately, Flamengo were helped by a bizarre blunder by IDV goalkeeper Aldair Quintana to send them through, but warning lights were flashing. Once they got in difficulties, the reigning champions had the look of an ageing side – and that was also the impression left by the two goalless draws in both legs of the semi-final against Estudiantes.

In the away leg in La Plata, Flamengo failed to muster a single shot, and

veteran keeper Fernando Muslera only had to make two saves in the Maracana, even though Estudiantes spent almost the entire second half with ten men.

It was a stubborn victory, one in the finest traditions of Estudiantes, who won this competition three times in a row between 1968 and 1970, and then again in 2009, when current club president Juan Sebastian Veron was pulling the strings in midfield (more on page 68).

The class of 2026, led by 48-year-old Uruguayan head coach Alexander Medina, will almost certainly settle into their 4-2-3-1 formation, in which both wide men are expected to work back.

Abel Ferreira's Palmeiras are less predictable. There have been two main acquisitions since last year's final: little Colombian World Cup midfielder Jhon Arias, and the big, left-footed Argentina-born centre-back Alexander Barboza.

With the latter's addition, it has been common to see Palmeiras line up with three at the back, Murilo on the right, captain Gustavo Gomez organising the defence from the middle and Barboza on the left, freeing wing-backs Agustin Giay and Joaquin Piquerez to move up the flanks.

This has been the base formation for the last few Libertadores matches. But is it the right way to take on Estudiantes? If so then Marlon Freitas and the left-footed Lucas Evangelista will operate in midfield, with the versatile Arias floating in front of them, supporting a front duo of Jose Manuel Lopez and Vitor Roque.

"Flaco" Lopez, another left-footer, went to the World Cup with Argentina and has been enjoying an outstanding year. Signed from Barcelona in 2025, Vitor Roque had an awkward start with the club, but blossomed once moved towards the left, giving him space to run both with and without the ball. A place might be found for Andreas Pereira, often a starter, while further options include Felipe Anderson, Paraguayan winger Ramon Sosa and intelligent midfielder Mauricio.

The key question is how Ferreira will choose to deploy these alternatives. Early in his reign it was widely thought that he was primarily a cup coach, and that his approach was too cautious for league campaigns. Back-to-back titles in 2022 and 2023 put that one to bed. Despite the evidence of the semi-final matches against Fluminense, his team are clearly capable of coming out to take the initiative. To what extent will he be prepared to do that in the final?

Unlike the previous knockout rounds, extra-time applies in the final if scores are level after 90 minutes. A war of attrition, then, is a possibility.

Last year's showpiece, which held so much promise, turned out to be a disappointing spectacle – the hope is that this year's game will cause a shock in the opposite direction.

Final host...the Estadio Centenario in Montevideo

THE ROAD TO THE FINAL

PALMEIRAS

GROUP STAGE

Junior 1-1 **Palmeiras**
Palmeiras 2-1 Sporting Cristal
Cerro Porteno 1-1 **Palmeiras**
Sporting Cristal 0-2 **Palmeiras**
Palmeiras 0-1 Cerro Porteno
Palmeiras 4-1 Junior

LAST 16

Palmeiras 1-1 Cerro Porteno
Cerro Porteno 0-1 **Palmeiras**
Palmeiras win 2-1 on aggregate

QUARTER-FINALS

Palmeiras 1-0 LDU
LDU 3-2 **Palmeiras**
3-3 on agg; Palmeiras win 4-3 on pens

SEMI-FINALS

Fluminense 1-2 **Palmeiras**
Palmeiras 0-1 Fluminense
2-2 on agg; Palmeiras win 5-3 on pens

ESTUDIANTES

GROUP STAGE

Independiente Medellin 1-1 **Estudiantes**
Estudiantes 2-1 Cusco
Estudiantes 1-1 Flamengo
Cusco 1-1 **Estudiantes**
Flamengo 1-0 **Estudiantes**
Estudiantes 1-0 Independiente Medellin

LAST 16

Estudiantes 1-1 Universidad Catolica
Universidad Catolica 0-3 **Estudiantes**
Estudiantes win 4-1 on aggregate

QUARTER-FINALS

Estudiantes 1-1 Corinthians
Corinthians 0-1 **Estudiantes**
Estudiantes win 2-1 on aggregate

SEMI-FINALS

Estudiantes 0-0 Flamengo
Flamengo 0-0 **Estudiantes**
0-0 on agg; Estudiantes win 3-2 on pens

'This is a different type of challenge'

Can Palmeiras' expensively assembled squad shrug off recent failures and rise to the challenge of being favourites?

Through to a fourth Copa Libertadores final in the remarkable six-year reign of Portuguese coach Abel Ferreira, it would seem that Palmeiras have hit a sweet spot. But up close, *la vita* is not quite as *dolce* for the club of Sao Paulo's giant Italian community.

The city possesses more Italian descendants than anywhere else in the world, including Rome, and the club's supporters have been treated to some wonderful times of late.

Before the Ferreira era, they had just one Libertadores title, won under the management of Luiz Felipe Scolari back in 1999. But recently, although the club has been in contention for everything, they have not been able to get their hands on the serious silverware.

The last major trophy was the national league title in 2023, a long time in the demanding environment of Brazilian football. Frustration is creeping in, and it must surely be taking a toll on Ferreira, a coach still young enough, at 47, and sufficiently brilliant to have a big future back in his native continent.

This year his team are mounting a three-pronged attack on glory. In November, they played in the semi-finals of the highly prestigious and lucrative domestic cup. And, at the time of writing, were again neck and neck with Flamengo in the fight to win the league. Last year Flamengo beat them to the title, and also came out on top in the final of the Copa Libertadores, winning by a single goal in Lima, Peru.

Just six days before this year's decider, in the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo, they meet Flamengo in the league in what many had expected to be effectively the first of two finals between the teams that have dominated South American football for a decade. Palmeiras booked their place in Montevideo, sat back and expected Flamengo to do likewise 24 hours later. But, as it turned out, they will instead be facing Estudiantes, a different type of challenge.

In any case, Palmeiras' approach is bound to be affected by what happens in the weeks leading up to the game. If, for example, they are knocked out of the cup and also lose to a wounded Flamengo, then the Libertadores might well be their only realistic chance of silverware, and the psychological burden on the players will not be easy to carry.

There has already been plenty of tension during the campaign. Palmeiras breezed through the group phase, but have had to battle their way through the knockout rounds. Ferreira has a reputation for caution in the big games, and in both the quarter-finals and semi-finals they sat too deep in protecting a lead and paid the price.

First, against Ecuador's LDU Quito they conceded two goals in stoppage time and had to go through a penalty shootout. And then, against fellow Brazilians Fluminense, Ferreira came close to self parody, taking off star centre-forward Jose Manuel "Flaco" Lopez with half an hour to go and inviting pressure that resulted in a late aggregate equaliser and another penalty shootout. Both times, giant goalkeeper Carlos Miguel saw them through.

> Palmeiras' last major trophy was the Brazilian league title in 2023, a long time ago in the demanding environment of Brazilian football

This "risk as little as possible" approach may seem classically old-school Italian, but it is in fact a clear divergence from the club's historic identity. Palmeiras were long regarded as "the academy," with a team and a fanbase that delighted in expressive, attractive football.

Such flamboyance came to be seen as a luxury when the club went through hard times at the start of the century, following the collapse of a successful sponsorship deal with Italian dairy giants Parmalat. Palmeiras were relegated to the second division in 2002, and again in 2012 – and the wilderness years had the effect of concentrating the mind.

They are now a well-run club, with a stadium widely seen as the best of Brazil's new arenas. The synthetic pitch is controversial, but it functions as part of a business model where the ground is frequently used for large concerts. The club's coffers are also full from the sales of a sequence of exceptional youth products – most notably Estevao to Chelsea and Endrick to Real Madrid, and also including the Manchester City pair of Allan and Vitor Reis.

This has enabled them to assemble a formidable squad, including five former Premier League players and seven who went to this year's World Cup. Such depth of resources would not have made them favourites against rivals Flamengo, who have even deeper pockets. In that case, they would have lined up as underdogs, a state of affairs which would seem to suit Ferreira on the big occasion. But it does mean that they will be favourites against Estudiantes, so it will be fascinating to see how Palmeiras approach the game.

The club's supporters will already be thinking beyond Montevideo to Qatar. Victory in the final would take them to the Intercontinental Cup a month later, a title they have never won and are truly desperate to win.

Tim Vickery

Star man...Jose Manuel "Flaco" Lopez celebrates scoring in the semi-final

'The latest remarkable chapter in this club's extraordinary story'

Brazilian clubs have dominated the Copa Libertadores for the last seven years – can Estudiantes of Argentina end that sequence?

Four years ago, Alexander Medina was in charge of Argentine side Velez Sarsfield for a Libertadores semi-final against Flamengo. In the first leg he went all out for a win, seeking to make the most of home advantage, but the approach backfired spectacularly. His team were taken apart, losing 4-0 on the way to a 6-1 aggregate defeat.

Medina had learned his lesson: against an opponent of such financial resources, he would have to be more pragmatic, seeking first and foremost to hold them in midfield and ease the pressure on the defence. He would have to do something more in line with the tradition of Estudiantes.

In this season's Libertadores, Medina and his men have written the latest remarkable chapter in this club's extraordinary story.

The route to the final has been an ongoing battle. They were seconds away from elimination in the group phase when they were saved by a stoppage-time goal against Colombian side Medellin. It was the last home match they won.

Throughout the knockout rounds, they drew the first leg at home and had to do the hard work on the road. First came Chile's Universidad Catolica, where Estudiantes produced their finest display of the campaign to win 3-0 in Santiago.

Then came the tense, dour struggles against the Brazilians. They drew with Corinthians, and then looked to have snatched victory in Sao Paulo with a late goal. But, right at the death, Corinthians were awarded a penalty. Memphis Depay stepped up. Had he scored, the tie would have gone to a shootout, and if Corinthians had prevailed then Brazil would have accounted for all four semi-finalists. But the Dutchman fired high over the bar, and Estudiantes went through.

Last season, Estudiantes took eventual winners Flamengo all the way to a shootout in the quarter-finals, and the Argentines showed it was no fluke in this year's group stage, holding the reigning champions to a draw at home and a narrow defeat away.

Meeting the Rio giants again in the semis, they were competitive once more. In three of the four goalless halves, they had the better chances and held on in relative comfort despite having Baltasar Rodriguez sent off early in the second half of the return game. And so, just like last year, it went to penalties – this time with a different outcome.

The hero was 40-year-old Uruguayan goalkeeper Fernando Muslera, who made three stunning saves. And after his World Cup humiliation in front of a global audience, only the most fervent of Flamengo supporters could begrudge him his moment.

> They were seconds away from elimination in the group phase when they were saved by a stoppage-time goal against Medellin

In front of Muslera is a team that is built much more on solid footballing sense than it is on breathtaking talent. Key to the game plan is veteran centre-forward Guido Carrillo, an imposing physical figure. Estudiantes look to him from set-pieces, and also from open play, when they seek to get players around him for flick-ons and second balls. They will hope to get former Argentina international Joaquin Correa fit for the final, since his capacity to run at defenders is useful. With Rodriguez suspended, they will probably use a pair of left-footed wingers, with Tiago Palacios coming in from the right and Joaquin Tobio Burgos, who strikes a mean corner, on the other flank. The experienced Lucas Piovi anchors the midfield intelligently, while his partner, the left-footed Alexis Castro, is adept at arriving in the penalty area as an element of surprise.

It certainly does not add up to the most terrifying line-up to ever take the field in a Libertadores final. A tally of 12 goals in 12 games tells its own story, and the game away to Universidad Catolica is their only victory by more than a single goal.

But there has only been one defeat – the 1-0 group-stage loss to Flamengo – and any team that can go through the knockout phase unbeaten is worthy of respect. Incidentally, that defeat came as a result of an error from Muslera, which made his semi-final shootout heroics all the more heart-warming.

The 2026 model of Estudiantes, then, are a team cast in the best traditions of the club, applying themselves grimly and making the best of what they have. Now they hope it will be enough to take them to Libertadores title number five – and, why not, then on to the Intercontinental title that they previously won in 1968.

It all seems a little unlikely, but then so did advancing through this Libertadores campaign, and yet here they are, preparing for the final.

Tim Vickery

Key striker... Guido Carrillo

AEROFIT

BARCELONA'S BRILLIANT BRAZILIAN

It has been a long and winding journey to the top of European football for the most dangerous attacker on the continent this season

Words: Tom Kundert, Luke Entwistle, Sean Cole & Sid Lowe

When the European club season paused in early November for the second international break of the 2026-27 campaign, one name stood at the top of the scoring charts across the continent's top five leagues: Raphinha. That is a sentence that might have seemed quite improbable at various moments over the past decade; in his early days at a dysfunctional Sporting side, during an unhappy spell at Rennes, while fighting relegation with Leeds United, or more recently when he was seemingly deemed surplus to requirements at Barcelona.

Raphinha was still a teenager when he left his home in Brazil in the winter transfer window of 2015-16 to play for the B-team of Portuguese side Vitoria Guimaraes. He was recommended to the club by another Brazilian-born star who had made his name in northern Portugal, Deco, Raphinha's agent at the time.

It is a relationship that has defined the forward's career; it was Deco, in his current capacity as Barcelona's sporting director, who insisted on keeping Raphinha at Camp Nou amid doubts about his future at the Spanish giants.

Raphinha's technique, work ethic and his thirst for self-improvement were traits quickly recognised and rewarded by his coaches. Half a season was enough for the player to be fast-tracked into Vitoria's first team, becoming a regular and a huge favourite amongst the notoriously fervent fans in Guimaraes.

Vitor Campelos was the B-team coach when the skinny 19-year-old Brazilian arrived: "He was tireless in training. He went at it full throttle and was ultra-competitive. He never gave up a single ball, but he was also enterprising. He really wanted to learn and was a very intelligent player. He had, and has, an ability to read the game."

In his second full season at the northern club, Raphinha exploded. He scored 18 goals in 43 games in all competitions – nobody has scored more for Vitoria in a single campaign this century – and contributed five assists too.

A move to one of Portugal's major clubs was inevitable and Sporting won the race for his signature in 2018, upon the insistence of current national team manager Jorge Jesus – although he was no longer Sporting's coach by the time the transfer was completed. The rising

Eye-catching ...Raphinha in action for his first European club, Vitoria Guimaraes, in 2017

Sporting star... Raphinha during his spell in Lisbon

star arrived at a traumatic time for the Lisbon outfit, which helps explain why, along with a troublesome groin strain, he failed to replicate his heroics of the previous season.

Sporting were still reeling from the infamous attack at their Alcochete training camp, when a number of their own fans let their frustrations known to the players and coaching staff. Several players abandoned the club, with Jesus and president Bruno de Carvalho falling victim to the chaos and forced out. Experienced coach Jose Peseiro was brought in but did not last past November, with new president Frederico Varandas taking a punt on Dutch manager Marcel Keizer. Sporting were out of contention for the title, but despite the instability still won both domestic cups, largely thanks to the brilliance of Bruno Fernandes, with Raphinha also making important contributions.

Fernandes and Raphinha were both obsessive trainers set on reaching the very top, so it was little surprise they hit it off. "Raphinha and Bruno Fernandes became great friends," explains former Portugal international Nani, also part of the 2018-19 Sporting team. "They were always practising penalties, free-kicks and staying behind for hours on end after the training sessions had finished."

Nani's longevity (aged 39 he is still playing, in Kazakhstan) is testament to his love of the game, and Raphinha's similar single-mindedness really struck a chord. "Raphinha was a kid I really liked. I tried to help him at Sporting, especially as we played in the same position. We played a lot of games together and I always tried to pass on my experience to him. He had a really well developed capacity to learn. I'm not at all surprised he's reached the heights he has."

> "Raphinha and Bruno Fernandes became great friends. They were always practising penalties, free-kicks and staying behind for hours on end"
>
> **Former Sporting winger Nani**

Yet Raphinha became a victim of circumstance. At the start of his second season at the Alvalade, he was sold by the club to Rennes for €21 million, making him the sixth-biggest sale in Sporting's history at the time.

For his new club, the signing was seen as a bit of a coup. Their president, Olivier Letang, revealed they had fought off interest from other European clubs. He was described as "the attacking player that [they] wanted" and one "toughened" by his experience playing European football at Sporting.

The Brazilian was signed to a five-year deal but would ultimately stay for less than one. He arrived at the start of the COVID-affected season and, unlike other leagues, Ligue 1 did not restart after its imposed suspension in March 2020.

For a significant investment, Rennes got only 36 games out of Raphinha. He would score eight and register seven assists in that time, with eight of those goal contributions coming in his debut campaign. Many of his goals came against sides that would be considered minnows – Amiens, Dijon, ASM Belfort, Saint-Etienne, Nantes, Reims and Athletico Marseille. None of those teams are still in the top flight; the latter no longer even exists.

Raphinha described his debut campaign at Roazhon Park as one of "adaptation," adding: "I think that I can show more. I would have liked to reach the objective of ten goals, ten assists".

Ultimately, he wouldn't get the chance to better his figures in his second campaign.

He began the 2020-21 season at the Breton club, but by October he had already left. It wasn't the cleanest of breaks. Publicly, the Brazilian was optimistic about playing in the Champions League for the first time, but Rennes said that the player's preference was to leave. They facilitated that departure, and Raphinha wasn't too pleased about it.

"I was told that Rennes wouldn't sell

Key team-mates... Raphinha and Bruno Fernandes celebrate together in the 2019 Portuguese Cup final

Elland Road hero...Raphinha celebrates scoring against West Ham

Team-mates... Raphinha and his former Leeds United colleague Mateusz Klich

me for €60m, but they sold me for €15m," he said. "I felt devalued. It clearly shows that I wasn't in the manager's plans or those of the club. They just decided to sell me. I was a bit annoyed because I had just finished my adaptation period in France."

Raphinha's availability caught the attention of Leeds United on their long-awaited return to the Premier League for the 2020-21 season.

The enigmatic Marcelo Bielsa had elevated a modest group of players to the Championship title and a hard-earned shot at the big time, but the squad needed significant reinforcement to compete at the top level. Over £100m was spent on new players, including £17m on Raphinha.

"He was always very professional. He worked hard and, obviously on the pitch, he made a big impression from day one," recalls his former Leeds team-mate Mateusz Klich, a first-team regular under Bielsa.

"We all knew he was only going to be here for a while and then he'd go to some big club. Football-wise, he was unbelievable, but he was also doing the most high-intensity sprints. He was very aggressive in pressing and he could defend."

Bielsa's distinctive tactical approach placed huge physical demands on his players, requiring extraordinary levels of fitness and commitment. But Raphinha adapted quickly. He even shone in the Cooper test, where players had to run as far as they could in 12 minutes, pushing their cardiovascular endurance to the limit.

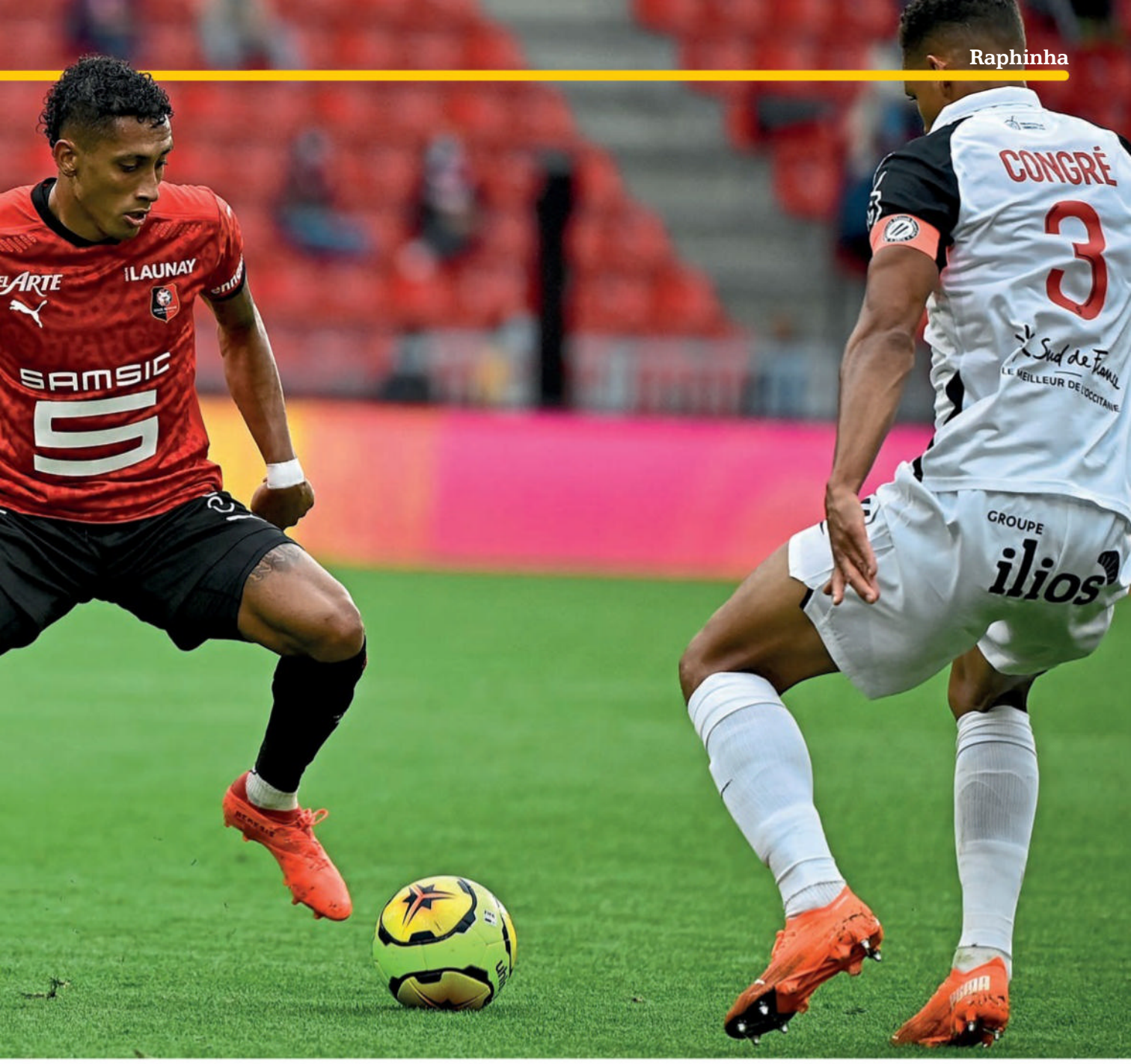
According to Klich, two aspects of Raphinha's game immediately stood out. "His finishing was unreal and I liked the way he dribbled at full sprint," says the Polish midfielder. "He was able to dribble past players at high pace, which is really hard. It's the most difficult thing in football. Not many players can do it. He enjoyed going one-v-one and had a lot of courage to do it."

> "We all knew he was only going to be here for a while and then he'd go to some big club. Football-wise, he was unbelievable"
>
> **Raphinha's former Leeds team-mate Mateusz Klich**

Raphinha's first season in English football was one of the strangest there has ever been. COVID lockdowns made for a late start and a condensed schedule, with virtually all games played in eerily empty stadiums. These were added complications for a 23-year-old Brazilian already facing considerable upheaval as he settled into a new team, country and league.

His grasp of English was limited, so Raphinha relied heavily on Rodrigo and Helder Costa, two fellow Portuguese speakers, who became his closest friends in the squad. Patrick Bamford found common ground by talking to him in French. Everyone else knew they could always fall back on a universal language. "If you have a player like that, you don't really need to talk to him!" laughs Klich. "The football does all the talking."

Forced to watch from afar, Leeds supporters fell in love with Raphinha. Anticipation would rise whenever he received the ball. He produced moments of jaw-dropping brilliance and treated



Rennes' record signing...Raphinha's time in Ligue 1 was cut short

them as routine. His immaculate first touch and close control made experienced opponents look foolish, including Crystal Palace's Gary Cahill.

Drawn across to the right wing during one encounter, the former England centre-back – a Premier League and Champions League winner at Chelsea – thought he had the situation under control. Raphinha was facing the corner flag, with the ball heading away from goal and towards the by-line. Suddenly, in one smooth motion, he flicked the ball from his left foot to his right and backheeled it through Cahill's legs, all while spinning around to burst past him into the penalty box. The audacity and execution was mesmerising. Cahill never saw it coming.

Such delicate ingenuity was allied to devastating power. Whether using his instep or his laces, Raphinha struck the ball with serious intent. He scored with thumping shots from outside the area against Everton, West Bromwich Albion and Southampton in his first season.

Raphinha typically played on the right flank, enabling him to cut inside onto his stronger foot. His team-mates understood that he was a game-changing talent who they could trust implicitly. "Whenever you play with players like Raphinha, it's just a pleasure," adds Klich. "It's very enjoyable. You know you can pass the ball to him at any time."

Leeds ended the season with four wins in a row to claim ninth place, a remarkable achievement for a promoted club.

After beginning the following campaign with three goals in six games, Raphinha was called up to the Brazil squad in October 2021 and immediately made his presence felt among established stars. Trailing Venezuela 1-0, he came off the bench to lead Brazil's recovery, creating two goals on his debut. A few days later he got his first international goals, scoring twice against Uruguay.

Now Raphinha knew he belonged at the highest level. He carried that self-assurance with him when he went back to Leeds, despite the club being mired in the bottom half of the table.

Their energetic style of play and bold man-marking system had lost its surprise factor. Morale and results plummeted. At the end of February 2022, shortly after

Big moment ...Raphinha scores his first international goal

heavy defeats to Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur, Bielsa was replaced by Jesse Marsch.

Raphinha knew he was leaving that summer, regardless of whether or not Leeds survived in the Premier League. Relegation might even have given him a smoother exit, but he refused to accept it. He ended as the Whites' top scorer with 11 goals, including one in securing a 2-1 win over Brentford on the final day. When safety was confirmed, he climbed into the away end to celebrate with the travelling fans.

"He saved us from relegation in his last season – he was huge" says Klich. "I'm not sure if we would have stayed up without him because he gave us goals and assists. He was always a key player."

Raphinha, then, departed Elland Road on good terms – especially as Leeds were able to recoup a club-record fee of £55m.

He had plenty of Premier League interest, but his mind was made up. "He told us that his dream was always to play for Barcelona," explains Klich, "and he made it happen."

Plenty of players dream of running out at Camp Nou wearing the Catalan club's famous colours, but for Raphinha the connection was personal.

He was seven years old when he met his idol Ronaldinho at a birthday party. They are both from Restinga, a Porto Alegre favela, and Raphinha's father Rafael – stage name Maninho – was the percussionist in a samba band. The band became one of Ronaldinho's favourites, regularly flown in to play at parties, and they became friends. He would watch them and they would watch him, by then the best player on Earth, idolised at Camp Nou.

Growing up given Barcelona shirts, the kid who was Ronaldinho's friend – which is about as cool as it gets – how could Raphinha not feel the pull?

> "I have never had a player like him"
>
> **Barcelona head coach Hansi Flick**

If that wasn't enough, there was also the Deco connection, his agent and Ronaldinho's former Barcelona team-mate, who was now advising the Barcelona club president Joan Laporta and would later become the sporting director.

Safety secured... Raphinha celebrates with the Leeds fans at the Brentford Community Stadium

Barcelona had a long tradition of Brazilians becoming stars there – Romario, Ronaldo, Rivaldo, Ronaldinho – so once the offer came in, Raphinha's mind was made up.

Jordi Cruyff and Mateu Alemany, in charge of Barcelona's signings at the time, had taken a conscious decision to sign Premier League players, and the club manager Xavi talked about the faith he had in him.

Barcelona new boy... Raphinha during his unveiling in 2022

But things were not easy. Although Raphinha's performances were good, they weren't quite at the level expected. It was also hard to avoid the feeling that there was a disconnect: in style and, eventually, between player and coach.

Off the pitch, Raphinha is different to his idol: more serious, more reserved, more Rivaldo than Ronaldinho. His confidence appeared to dip. In the early months of 2023, he was encouraged to watch videos of himself at Leeds to remind him of how good he could be, why he had signed for Barcelona. Yet how he played at Leeds – sprinting through space, driving super-fast, high-intensity transitions – was not necessarily what Barca required.

There was also competition; Ousmane Dembele was there and so was an emerging young kid called Lamine Yamal. Raphinha's numbers were impressive: ten goals and 12 assists in his first season under Xavi, ten goals and 13 assists in his second. But Raphinha would later admit: "I felt that [Xavi] and the coaching staff didn't trust in me. When there was no one else, I was there. But when there was someone else who could play in my position, he put him in without doubting."

Raphinha had become convinced that he was always the first man to see his number come up, that he never got more than an hour. And so the pressure built to do something in that time, which didn't help. The stats showed that he was not wrong. In 60 games under Xavi, Raphinha played 90 minutes only seven

times: twice in the first season, five times in the second.

He also couldn't help but hear the rumours, fear that the coach didn't want to keep him. And although Xavi departed in the summer of 2024, and Raphinha had successfully moved to the left to accommodate Yamal on the right, he felt sure that his time at the Camp Nou was coming to a close. Barcelona were very publicly chasing Nico Williams, keen to bring together the pair of friends who'd been so impressive at the Euros for Spain. Raphinha admitted that a photoshopped image of Williams in his No.11 shirt had hurt.

But Barcelona failed to get Williams and so, it turned out, they just had to settle for the best instead. A call from new head coach Hansi Flick brought the change. Raphinha had been on holiday after the Copa America, trying to assimilate the idea that it was over, when the phone rang. Flick told him to come and speak to him before making a decision he might regret. "You're going to be important and the style will suit you," he told him.

"In my head, I knew I was going to leave," the Brazilian said. "But I felt a lot of faith in me. [Flick] gave me the confidence to play my football."

His football was Flick's football. The intensity, the speed, the almost manic way they played was perfect for him, the Brazilian at the head of the aggressive pressing that was fundamental for what Flick wanted. But this was as much about feeling as it was football.

All he needed was love. There was something about being wanted, valued, that transformed him, the confidence flooding through him. And when team-mates voted him as one of the club captains, that was underlined. He appeared surprised, genuinely moved, that they had chosen him, and that sense of gratitude, warmth and responsibility drove him. The combination of rejection and affection fuelled him: it was one thing to prove people wrong, even better to prove them right. "When I saw people voting for me, it was like a shift in mindset: they were seeing something in me I didn't realise was there, and that has changed me," he said.

Idol...Raphinha has known Ronaldinho since he was seven

> As football stopped for the first international break, Raphinha stood head and shoulders above everyone

That first season, Raphinha guided Barcelona to the league and cup double, as well as a Champions League semi-final. Their most outstanding player, he produced a campaign that was Ballon d'Or worthy. Flying in from the left wing, Raphinha scored 34 goals and provided 26 assists in 57 games. Another league title followed and, while injuries reduced Raphinha's contribution, there were 21 goals and eight assists in 33 games during 2025-26. Flick's faith had been repaid. "I have never had a player like him," the coach said.

He was about to get even better, too. At the start of the 2026-27 season, Flick made Raphinha the first captain. He also made him a centre-forward. Again, it was partly circumstantial. Again, it started with Barcelona's failure to sign a player – this time Julian Alvarez from Atletico Madrid – but it was also rooted in the coach's conviction. Flick first asked Raphinha to play there during pre-season but had contemplated it for a while. His idea was based more on how Raphinha would lead the press from the middle than the goals, but there were goals too.

Lots and lots of goals. As football stopped for the first international break in September and October, Raphinha had signed a new contract, announcing his desire to retire at Camp Nou, and stood head and shoulders above everyone. Supposedly just filling in at centre-forward, he went to Brazil having scored 12 league goals, plus two in the Champions League. Europe's nearest goalscorers were five behind; 92 top-flight European teams had fewer goals. No one in Barca's history had started a season as prolifically. All those great strikers couldn't match the man who had never played there before, not even when he was a kid invited to a birthday party with Ronaldinho.

Deadly duo...Lamine Yamal and Raphinha celebrate a goal v Rayo Vallecano

Raphinha

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TOP SCORER BY SEASON

- 2020-21 **ERLING HAALAND** *(B. Dortmund)* **10 GOALS**
- 2021-22 **KARIM BENZEMA** *(Real Madrid)* **15 GOALS**
- 2022-23 **ERLING HAALAND** *(Manchester City)* **12 GOALS**
- 2023-24 **KYLIAN MBAPPE** *(PSG)* & **HARRY KANE** *(Bayern)* **8 GOALS**
- 2024-25 **RAPHINHA** *(Barcelona)* & **SERHOU GUIRASSY** *(B. Dortmund)* **13 GOALS**
- 2025-26 **KYLIAN MBAPPE** *(Real Madrid)* **15 GOALS**

LA LIGA HAT-TRICK HEROES

6

Six players have scored hat-tricks in consecutive La Liga games this century: Lionel Messi, Gonzalo Higuain, Luis Suarez, Antoine Griezmann, Cristiano Ronaldo and, after notching against Racing Santander and Sevilla in September, Raphinha

MOST CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ASSISTS IN A SINGLE SEASON

PLAYER (CLUB, SEASON)	ASSISTS
1. Luis **FIGO** *(Barcelona, 1999-2000)*	9
2. **RAPHINHA** *(Barcelona, 2024-25)*	8
3. David **BECKHAM** *(Man. United, 1998-99)*	8
4. Gaizka **MENDIETA** *(Valencia, 2000-01)*	8
5. **NEYMAR** *(Barcelona, 2016-17)*	8
6. James **MILNER** *(Liverpool, 2017-18)*	8

BRAZIL

43
CAPS

12
GOALS

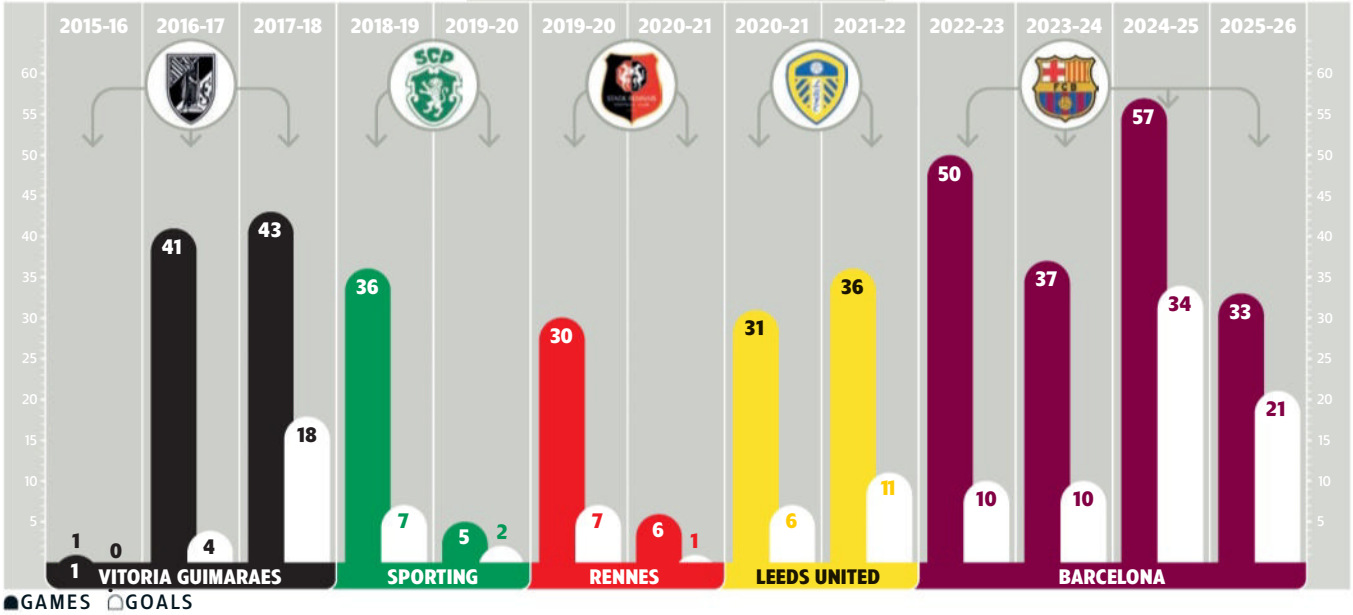
LEEDS UNITED RECORD SALES

£55m	**RAPHINHA** *(Barcelona, 2022)*
£45m	**KALVIN PHILLIPS** *(Manchester City, 2022)*
£40m	**GEORGINIO RUTTER** *(Brighton & Hove Albion, 2024)*
£30m	**ARCHIE GRAY** *(Tottenham Hotspur, 2024)*
£29.1m	**RIO FERDINAND** *(Manchester United, 2002)*

BARCA'S TOP-SCORING BRAZILIANS

	GAMES	GOALS
1. **RIVALDO**	235	130
2. **EVARISTO**	151	105
3. **NEYMAR**	186	105
4. **RAPHINHA**	190	94*
5. **RONALDINHO**	207	94
6. **RONALDO**	49	47
7. **ROMARIO**	65	39
8. **GIOVANNI**	107	35
9. Philippe **COUTINHO**	106	25
10. Dani **ALVES**	408	24

**Stats correct as of Wednesday, November 4*



Emerging stories of the 2026-27 season

Nick Bidwell picks out the teams, players and coaches that could define the 2026-27 season

1 PODOLSKI THE PROPRIETOR STARTS WITH A BANG

Lukas Podolski, he of the explosive left foot, World Cup winners' medal and 130 caps for Germany, always celebrated goals with a passion bordering on the manic and would surely be the life and soul of the party if his Gornik Zabrze can claim their first Polish title in almost four decades. After ending his playing career with his boyhood team last season, and lifting the Polish Cup in one of his last-ever games, the former Arsenal man took ownership of the club in the summer and they have picked up where they left off at the end of the last campaign, determined to add to their trophy cabinet. Although Lech Poznan are favourites to win a third straight crown, Gornik have plenty of momentum and can count on the class of Dominican Republic wide-man Peter Gonzalez and attacking midfielder Kacper Urbanski.

Gornik Zabrze owner...Lukas Podolski

2 SALAH PLUS REIS EQUALS GOALS GALORE

Egyptian attacking icon Mohamed Salah has certainly been thriving since leaving Liverpool for Trabzonspor a few months ago, looking as sharp as ever when accumulating eight goals in as many Super Lig fixtures at the start of this term, including a memorable hat-trick in a 4-0 win over champions Galatasaray. His new manager, Thomas Reis, only took charge in early September after Fatih Tekke paid the price for an early Europa League exit, but has quickly designed a system specifically for Salah. "We know how dangerous Salah is with the ball," declared the German coach. "He needs freedom and team-mates who scrap and make space for him."

Eyeing history... Roma have made a strong start

3 CAN ROMA WIN THEIR FIRST SERIE A TITLE IN A QUARTER OF A CENTURY?

While Internazionale, three-time Italian champions in the last six years, will take some dislodging from top spot, Roma fans have enjoyed a strong start under coaching wizard Gian Piero Gasperini. The former Atalanta boss led the *Giallorossi* back to the Champions League for the first time in seven years in his first term, and the signs are positive again. Leading the charge on the pitch is the deadly finishing of Dutch attacker Donyell Malen, serviced by the deft playmaking of Argentine Paulo Dybala.

On the up... Freiburg boss Julian Schuster

4 CAN FREIBURG FINALLY BREAK INTO THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE?

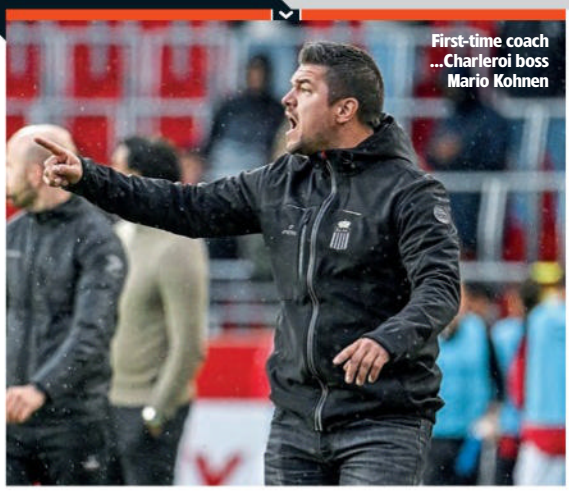
Their confidence boosted by a first-ever European final last season – losing 3-0 to Aston Villa in the Europa League showpiece – the Black Forest club are very much on an upward trajectory. Julian Schuster's hard-running and purposeful side have found another gear of late, much improved in terms of control and possession, ever-ready to go for goal and showcasing young talents like full-back Philipp Treu and left-winger Derry Scherhant. A Champions League ticket, though, may be out of reach for a side that tends to cave in on trips to big-name Bundesliga opponents.

Thriving in Turkey... Mo Salah

5 DEPORTIVO FIND THEIR PETER PAN

Some of the youngsters at Deportivo de A Coruna jokingly refer to the club's 37-year-old Gabonese striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang – who arrived at the newly-promoted side from Marseille in a cut-price €1.5 million transaction – as "Papa" and for good reason. Quick to establish himself as a popular and influential leader at the Riazor stadium, the former Borussia Dortmund, Arsenal and Barcelona frontrunner recently made history as only the second player to score in each of the first five matchdays of a La Liga season – matching a record held by Zlatan Ibrahimovic. "He makes our play so easy thanks to his perfect movement," says his Depor team-mate Luismi Cruz.

Prolific... Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang

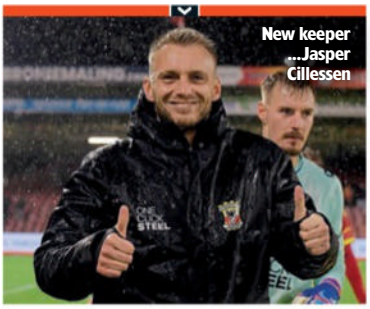

First-time coach ...Charleroi boss Mario Kohnen

6 LOVING LIFE BY THE LAKESIDE

Seventy-seven years after their last Swiss league title, Lugano's brilliant start to the 2026-27 campaign rightly has supporters of the *Bianconeri* (White and Blacks) dreaming of an all-too rare coronation. Unbeaten in their first 12 Swiss Super League encounters, winning 11 of them, the club from the Italian-speaking Ticino region have all the requisite ingredients for domestic pre-eminence: the financial support of US owner Joe Mansueto (who also has MLS outfit Chicago Fire in his portfolio), a brand-new stadium, an astute coach in Mattia Croci-Torti and a host of fine players, not least German centre-back Lars Lukas Mai and schemer Anto Grgic.

7 CHARLEROI LEAD THE CHANGING OF THE GUARD IN BELGIUM

Usually stuck in mid-table in the Belgian top flight, the Charleroi Zebras suddenly and spectacularly have galloped to the fore this season, winning eight of their first ten league fixtures and proudly sitting among the title challengers. It remains to be seen whether they have the necessary staying power, but what's not in doubt is the huge strides they've made under coach Mario Kohnen, who has built a meticulously well-organised and resourceful collective, a side which excels at set-pieces. Key men include the streetwise centre-back pairing of Aiham Ousou and Cheick Keita and intelligent midfield controller Amine Boukamir.


New keeper ...Jasper Cillessen

8 DEVENTER, THE PLACE TO GO FOR GOALS

When it comes to Eredivisie entertainment, nobody does it better than Deventer outfit Go Ahead Eagles, a team far too cavalier for their own good. Four goals or more were scored in eight of their first ten fixtures this season, a peculiar sequence in which the Eagles only managed two wins and proved themselves to be the Jekyll and Hyde of the Netherlands: enterprising in attack – with free-scoring Danish striker Soren Tengstedt leading the way – but far too prone to leaving the back door open. Former *Oranje* goalkeeper Jasper Cillessen has been signed as a free agent to bring some order to the back line.

Swiss league pace-setters...Lugano

9 CAN ANYONE STOP THE PORTO JUGGERNAUT?

Reigning Portuguese champions Porto, who did not drop a single point in their first ten Primeira Liga games of 2026-27, have already opened up a sizeable gap at the top of the table and were further boosted by a 3-1 home win over arch-rivals Benfica in September. Domestically, the Dragons are the pick of the crop at the moment, solid at the back and boasting the best all-round midfielder in the country in the Dane Victor Froholdt. Not that they are perfect. Poor results in the Champions League shone a light on their limitations.

Flying high... Porto are the early leaders in Portugal

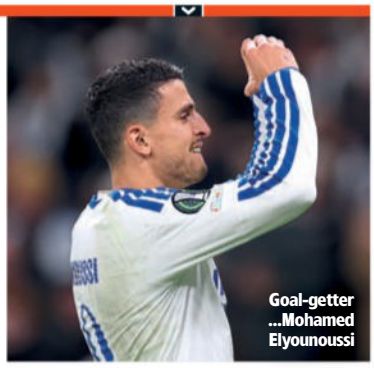
Tough times... could Valencia be relegated from La Liga?

10 MISERY AT THE MESTALLA

Hard to believe that Valencia, one of the most prestigious clubs in Spain, are currently fighting for their lives in La Liga's bowels of hell. When Barcelona star Rodri recently described Valencia's efforts in a 5-0 loss to the Catalans as "*malísimo*" (awful), he was only stating a fact. A team without a soul, identity and direction, they only managed one win in their opening ten games of the season, the worst start in their history. With coach Carlos Corberan shown the door in mid-September and disgruntled supporters calling for owner Peter Lim to vacate the premises, the last hope lies with new Mexican boss Javier Aguirre.

11 THE LIONS ARE BACK – AND ON THE MARKET

FC Copenhagen, Danish Superliga winners on 15 occasions this century, have made a lightning-quick recovery from a historically poor campaign in 2025-26, when they finished an abject seventh in the regular season standings, their worst performance since 2000. Full credit to head coach Bo Svensson for picking them off the floor so swiftly, solving their consistency issues, improving the defensive set-up and finding the right system to bring the best out of Norwegian goal-grabber Mohamed Elyounoussi.



Goal-getter ...Mohamed Elyounoussi

Word has it that the club's owners, Parken Sport & Entertainment, are conducting a strategic review that could see the club put up for sale.

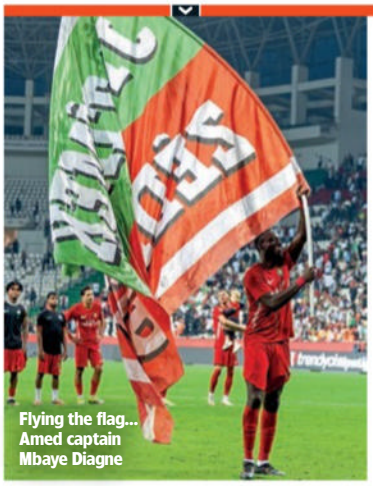
"Pitbull"... Santa Clara boss Petit

12 UP, UP AND AWAY IN THE AZORES

Not surprisingly for a team coached by the gritty former Portugal midfielder Petit – aka "Pitbull" – Santa Clara's overachieving start to the new Primeira Liga campaign has its roots in their will-to-win and solid organisation. But what's often overlooked is the joy they go about their business with. It's smiles all-round at the Azores club, and no one is beaming more than striker and skipper Goncalo Paciencia, 32, who is in line for his first Portugal cap since 2019. The well-travelled striker, who's played in Greece, Germany, Spain, Japan and Brazil offers height, presence and nimble ball skills.

13 WERE REAL MADRID WRITTEN OFF TOO SOON IN THE LA LIGA TITLE RACE?

With Barcelona victorious in their first nine games and Real Madrid suffering more than a few teething problems on Jose Mourinho's return to the Bernabeu, certain Spanish scribes were always going to have fun portraying the *Galacticos* as something of a fading force. So much for that take; thanks to a 2-1 win at Barca in late October, a game *Los Blancos* simply could not afford to lose, Madrid are up and running again, just as likely to go all the way in La Liga as the rejuvenated Atletico Madrid or the Barca machine. Mourinho would have loved his team's performance at Camp Nou, especially the defensive application and dominance in midfield, an area where Barca usually dominate. The fact that it was achieved without the suspended Vinicius Junior does, though, present Mourinho with a dilemma: does the team function better overall without the Brazilian megastar in the starting XI?

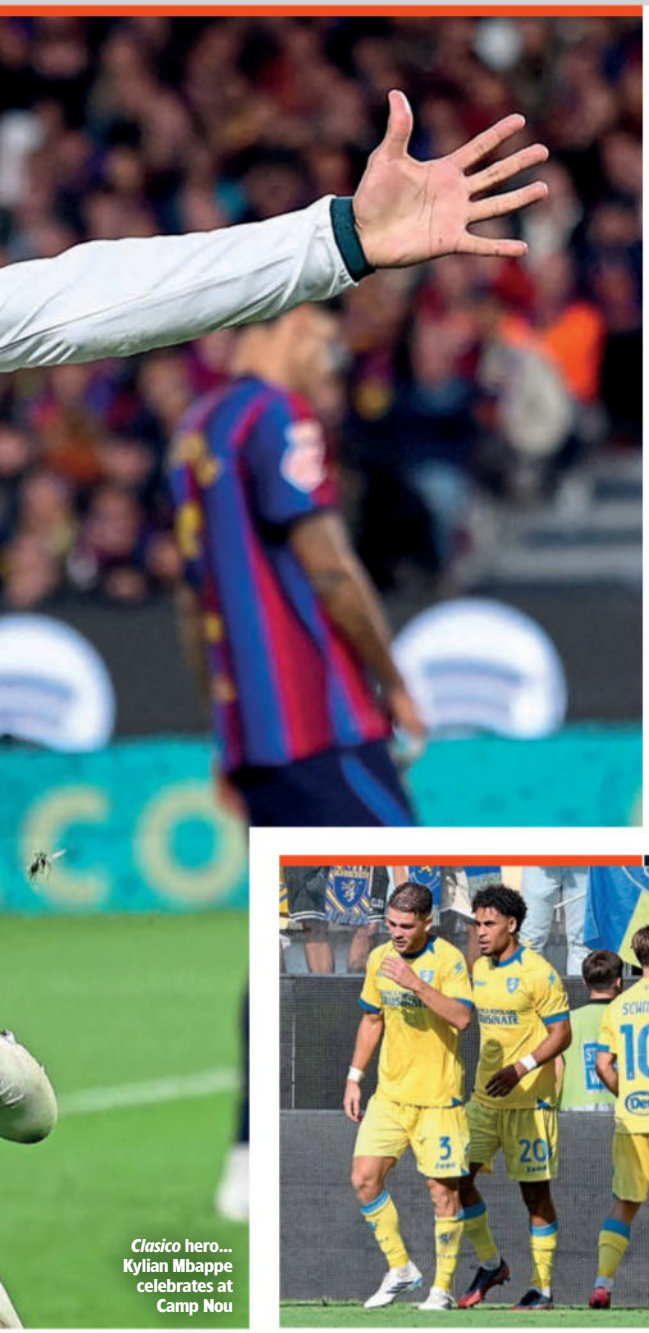


Flying the flag... Amed captain Mbaye Diagne

14 AMED MAKE THEIR MARK

Even the most fervent fans of Amed must be pinching themselves to see their side setting the pace in the Turkish Super Lig in their very first top-flight season. Located in the southern city of Diyarbakir, the largest Kurd-majority conurbation in the country, Amed are intensely proud of their ethnic identity and have used it as fuel in their remarkable ascent from the regional leagues to the pro ranks in 13 years. Said to be supported by four million Kurds, Amed's scalps so far this term include Trabzonspor and Besiktas.

Premier League surprise packages ...Brighton



Clasico hero... Kylian Mbappe celebrates at Camp Nou

Irreplaceable ...Kvaratskhelia had knee surgery

15 CAN PSG COPE WITHOUT WING WIZARD KHVICHA KVARATSKHELIA?

Within a week of the Georgian going down with an ACL injury during PSG's Champions League clash with Barcelona, the winger was whisked off to Qatar for surgery, and the hope is that he'll return before the end of the season. In the meantime, the European champions are not short of stand-ins; Desire Doue is hugely talented, as are new signings Maghnes Akliouche and Mika Godts, while Ferran Torres has experience on the wing and even left-back Nuno Mendes could be shifted forward. Still, the brutal truth is that Kvara is irreplaceable, an extraterrestrial mix of dazzling dribbling skills, unpredictability and fearlessness. PSG's hopes of a third European crown have taken a severe hit.

Upstarts... Frosinone

16 THE FROSINONE FAIRY TALE

Who would've imagined that freshly-promoted Frosinone, a club with only three top-flight campaigns to their name, would find themselves in the Serie A top six in early November, above the likes of Napoli, Juventus and Atalanta. In his second season in charge of the Roman outfit, head coach Massimiliano Alvini has constructed a side that is aggressive, direct and full of improvisational quality going forward. Watch out for Algeria winger Fares Ghedjemis and clever centre-forward Antonio Raimondo.

17 CAN BRIGHTON WIN THE TITLE?

The Seagulls were in dreamland after qualifying for Europe for the first time ever in 2023, but since Fabian Hurzeler was appointed in 2024 the club's ascent has accelerated. Now after a flying start to the season, playing brave and attractive football, Brighton are being talked about as Premier League title contenders. Perhaps far-fetched, but after blitzing champions Arsenal, winning away to Manchester City and sitting in the top three ahead of the international break, finishing in the Champions League places should certainly not be an unrealistic aim.

INEOS chief... Sir Jim Ratcliffe

18 INEOS' FOOTBALL EMPIRE FALLING APART?

Plenty has been written about the struggles of Manchester United, whose problems have not been alleviated since British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe acquired a 25% stake in the club in December 2023 and took charge of football operations. Elsewhere in INEOS' network of clubs, fans of Nice remain firmly opposed to the owners after narrowly avoiding the drop last term, and the Ligue 1 outfit is still up for sale, while Lausanne-Sport are rock-bottom of the Swiss table and in October were put up for sale as well.

Rapid reset... Johannes Thorup

19 ONE OF THOSE SEASONS AT BAYERN?

The sporting gods seem to have it in for perennial Bundesliga champions Bayern Munich this autumn. See their lengthy injury list featuring Manuel Neuer, Ismael Saibari, Jamal Musiala, Serge Gnabry and Luis Diaz; coach Vincent Kompany temporarily out of commission after collapsing on the training ground with what was later diagnosed as a meningeal irritation, an inflammation of the protective membrane surrounding the brain and spinal cord; and the death of Joshua Kimmich's father. Even

newly-crowned Ballon d'Or winner Harry Kane could not avoid the curse, missing a late penalty in the 2-2 home draw with Dortmund in the *Klassiker*.

20 RAPID RESET FOR THORUP

Danish coach Johannes Thorup felt somewhat hard done by when sacked by English Championship club Norwich City in April 2025 after just nine months in charge. Chastened by that bitter experience, the 37-year-old is tougher and wiser and has bounced back in some style at Austrian table-toppers Rapid Vienna. The famous old Viennese club, 18 years without a domestic league title, certainly look the real deal right now, victorious in ten of their first 11 games – their best start in almost four decades – always on the front foot and piling up the goals.

Solid start ...Ajax

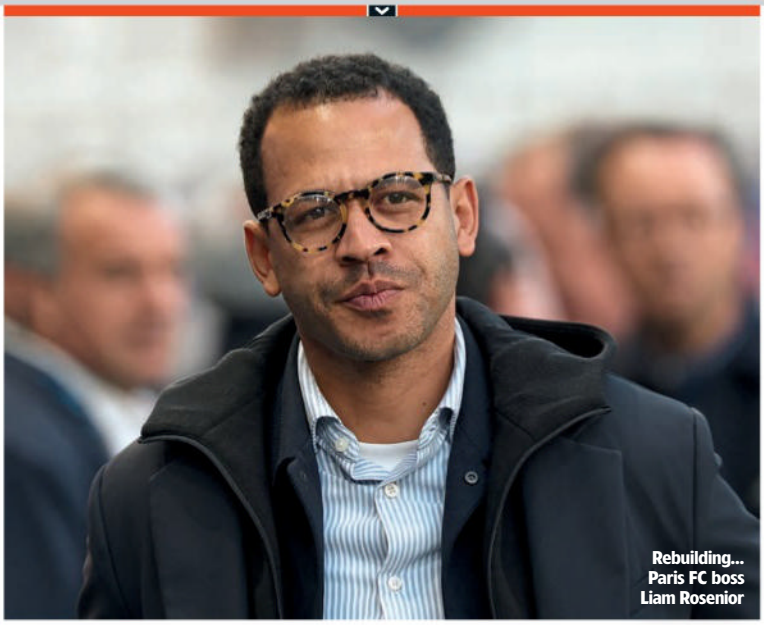
21 CAN AJAX END THEIR FOUR-SEASON TITLE DROUGHT?

One of the most prestigious names in European club football, Ajax have made a habit of dropping the ball in recent years. But under former Girona boss Michel, they look a different proposition. The current side may not have the outrageous flair of the past, but are collectively solid, mentally strong and full of raw-boned power. Experienced new signings such as Moroccan enforcer Sofyan Amrabat (ex-Fenerbahce and Manchester United) and the former Borussia Dortmund and Germany attacking midfielder Julian Brandt have made all the difference.

Another injury... Ismael Saibari got injured v Borussia Dortmund

22 CONFLICTING EMOTIONS IN THE ETERNAL CITY

Bizarre events at Lazio, where amid the euphoria of the team's shock top-of-the-table charge in Serie A – unbeaten in their first ten games, winning nine of them – large swathes of *Laziali* remain opposed to club president Claudio Lotito. At the helm for over two decades, he has been blamed by fans for showing a lack of ambition and, in a concerted attempt at regime change, they have boycotted the stadium. Meanwhile, a cut-price squad goes from strength to strength under new head coach Gennaro Gattuso.



Rebuilding... Paris FC boss Liam Rosenior

23 ROSENIOR REBUILDING HIS REPUTATION

With Paris Saint-Germain continuing to make the Ligue 1 title race a non-event, it's clear that the French top flight is in dire need of a shake-up – and PSG's neighbours are hoping to provide it. Backed by billionaire owners, Paris FC spent big last summer and their new-look squad has been moulded into shape nicely by the former Strasbourg and Chelsea boss Liam Rosenior, who headed back across the English Channel after only lasting three months at Stamford Bridge. Leading the line for his side is former Auxerre forward Lassine Sinayoko, who contributed eight goals and five assists in his first nine games. The Paris derby, in early December, could be a thriller.

Empty seats ...Lazio players celebrate a goal inside an empty Stadio Olimpico

All change at the Alvalade... Sporting changed managers at the start of November

24 FONSECA'S EMOTIONAL RETURN TO SPORTING

After seeing their side fall nine points behind Portugal's runaway league leaders Porto, Sporting's decision-makers concluded that they'd seen enough, parting company with Rui Borges and poaching Paulo Fonseca from Lyon to replace him. Such are the demands of *O Tres Grandes*; Sporting had only lost one of their first ten league games. Fonseca, a boyhood Sporting fan, broke down in tears at the end of his final game in charge of Lyon. The move ends a ten-year absence from Portuguese football for the ex-Porto and Braga coach, who has also had spells at Shakhtar, Lille, Roma and Milan during the last decade.

MARCUS EDWARDS

"I want to play my part in helping Cyprus achieve something special"

With two goals in his first four games for Cyprus, the 27-year-old Burnley winger made an instant impact on the international stage. He sat down with *World Soccer* to discuss his memorable debut, embracing his Cypriot roots, and his ambitions with the Mediterranean island…

You played for England up to Under-20 level, so when did you first start thinking seriously about representing Cyprus?
I've always had a close connection to Cyprus through my mother's side. I've visited the island every summer with her and my brother to visit my grandparents and to see my cousins. When I was younger and my nan lived in England, I stayed with her for a period, and she was like a second mum to me. I went to Greek school and coming from north London, where there is a big Greek Cypriot community, I was always surrounded by the culture. Playing for Cyprus just felt like a natural progression for me.

Did that familiarity with the country help with your decision?
Definitely. I knew the country, the people and I speak a little Greek too, so it wasn't as though I was going somewhere completely alien to me and having to start from scratch. I spoke with my family, my mum and dad, and we felt it was a good time for me to go and play international football. I went to watch the team play last summer and they had a new coach [Akis Mantzios] and were looking to improve, so I felt it was a good opportunity to be a part of the set-up and to also show what I could do at international level. Given that my nan lives there, representing Cyprus also gives me more opportunities to see her, and she can come and watch me play.

What does playing international football mean to you?
I've seen team-mates who represent smaller nations have the opportunity to play in big tournaments, such as the World Cup. I've seen what it means to them and their countries. That made me think more seriously about what representing Cyprus could mean, both for me and for my family, and now having sampled international football myself, I can see how special it can be.

Watford's Hector Kyprianou and Notts County's Nick Tsaroulla are also in the squad. Has having them around also helped you settle in?
I didn't actually know who would be in the squad when I first arrived, but when I saw them, it was great. We could bond over the fact that we were all from London and share little things about our Cypriot backgrounds. Having that familiarity definitely helped me settle in. Everything just felt very smooth and natural.

You've played in the Premier League with Burnley and with Sporting in the Primeira Liga, so how does international football compare standard-wise?
I was pleasantly surprised by the quality. There were players in the squad who made me think: "This guy is really good." I made my debut against Montenegro in our Nations League group, and they were particularly impressive. They were good from a technical point of view, used the ball well, and it just felt like a familiar level to what I've experienced before. Different opponents also bring different challenges. Montenegro kept the ball and put us under pressure, but we also played Latvia who defended in a much deeper block. You have to adapt to different styles, and that's part of what makes international football interesting.

You scored on your debut against Montenegro. Was that important for you personally?
It was a really nice feeling and a good way to settle into a new camp and start building confidence. Obviously, the result wasn't what we wanted [Cyprus lost 2-1 to a late goal], but scoring was a positive moment. It helps you lay down a marker and show what you can bring to the group.

You also scored a sensational last-gasp winner in the 2-1 home win against Latvia, curling the ball into the top corner. Is it the best goal you've ever scored?
I'd put it in my top two! It was the importance of the goal and how much we wanted to win that made it so special. My nan was watching me play live for the first or second time, so that made it even more memorable. It was my first trip to Cyprus as a national-team player, so to score a goal like that was amazing. When I saw the ball coming off my foot and the way it was travelling, I thought it was going in. The celebrations showed exactly how much it meant to everyone. You could feel the excitement and pride around the team and among the supporters.

In the Nations League, Cyprus have done really well in their group. Can you sense that you've helped galvanise the fans, who had pretty much lost all hope in their national team?

Definitely. I can feel the enthusiasm around the national team growing, and that's really important. We want to keep improving and give the supporters something to be excited about. Under this coach and with the players we've assembled, we are heading in the right direction. I want to play my part in helping Cyprus achieve something special, so helping the team walk out at a major tournament is high on my list. It would be an incredible achievement and something to make the entire nation proud.

Interview by Luke Nicoli

Credit: Cyprus FA

VINCENZO ANNESE

"The big plan is to aim for the World Cup"

The globe-trotting Italian, who has enjoyed managerial spells on four different continents, discusses his plans for Equatorial Guinea after being appointed as the West African nation's new head coach

You were thrust straight into your new job at the start of the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers in September...
Yeah, and I think we played well. We lost 2-0 to DR Congo in Kinshasa, but I thought we played good football and could have got a goal when the score was 1-0 to them and made life a lot more difficult for them. Then we beat Sierra Leone in our second game.

The Equatorial Guinea squad had been together for a long time under your predecessor and were the surprise packages of the AFCON finals in the Ivory Coast in 2024. Does that make your job a lot easier?
Well, to be honest with you, I think we were the team that made the most changes in playing personnel of any of the other countries at the start of these Cup of Nations qualifiers. There is a good atmosphere, but I think it is a totally new team because so many players have gone; Pedro Obiang is now the sporting director of Monza, Emilio Nsue is 37 years old and there are others that did not make the squad because we had a couple of injuries. I feel that it's good to give opportunities to a new generation. I had one or two new caps and the average age of the team is certainly a lot younger than it has been for a long time.

Are you actively looking for players with Equatorial Guinean heritage in Europe like many of the other African countries do?
Sure, it's my target to try, and I think there are many more players in Spain who have a parent who comes from Equatorial Guinea. Some might be wanting to see if they can play in the future for Spain, so we need to convince them to come with us. But in the short time we have left in the Cup of Nations qualifying, if we cannot convince them right now to play for our country, then we'll work on them for the future. I think there is an opportunity to strengthen the squad and this will be our target for the future, for sure.

Is this a job for you or for the federation to find these players?
Probably more from the federation, but I want to be always involved.

You have worked in many countries in a lot of different jobs. Is it fair to say this is the highest-profile job that you have had?
Well, I was a technical director of Burkina Faso, which was also a high level. I can say in terms of responsibility that for sure this is my biggest, but it's almost the same because in Burkina Faso I did a lot of the coaching of the team too, doing all the training programmes and working with some top players, Champions League players like Edmond Tapsoba, Lassina Traore and Dango Ouattara.

What attracted you to the Equatorial Guinea job?
The big plan is to aim for the World Cup in four years' time. This is our target. But first of all, we need to try to get to the Cup of Nations finals. That is never easy, especially in our group. We have strong opponents. We try to do the maximum because we know that DR Congo is, for me at least, the top team that you can find in Africa now.

You have spoken previously about one day wanting to coach in Serie A. Is that possible after all of the globetrotting?
I'm the only Italian coach to have worked on four continents and I've won trophies around the world, but for someone like me who wants to return to coach in Italy, who thinks he deserves an opportunity, it's becoming a disadvantage. I am very determined. I didn't make it to Serie A as a footballer. I spent three years in Serie C with Andria and one with Foggia, and then worked as a fitness coach. But I understood that if I wanted to coach at a high level, I would have to go overseas.

Things are different now. Ten years ago there was little room for a youth coach, and I also wanted to go out and understand the world. I went first to the Baltic countries, and I was coach of the junior national teams in Armenia. I won a first trophy in Ghana and two championships in a row with Kerala in India. I've written a book about all the adventures!

And do you think you'll end up one day coaching in Serie A?
I can only achieve that if I get results.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

Credit: Alamy

THE ITALIAN JOB

Why British players are moving to Serie A in greater numbers than ever before

Words: Greg Whelan

It was once universally hailed as the best league in the world, a stage for many of the game's great players. During the halcyon days of Serie A, Graeme Souness, Trevor Francis, David Platt and Paul Gascoigne were among the British stars to make the move.

Now, the Italian top flight has once again become the top destination for British players seeking a new challenge abroad. In greater numbers than ever before, they are choosing Italy over Spain, France or Germany to continue their careers. Some, most notably Scott McTominay, have done so very successfully.

Those achievements, a change in the rules, financial constraints and changing perceptions about what British players can offer have all been significant factors in explaining the rise.

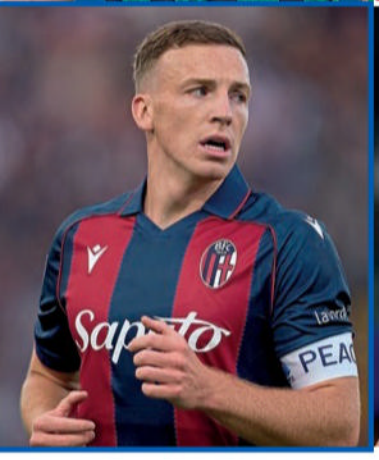
The sight of British players in the Italian top flight is not new. English striker Charles Adcock was the first, joining Padova back in 1946. In the late 1950s, Welshman John Charles won five major trophies during a stellar five-year spell with Juventus, and remains one of the Turin giants' greatest-ever imports, before Jimmy Greaves, Joe Baker and Scot Denis Law arrived in the early '60s.

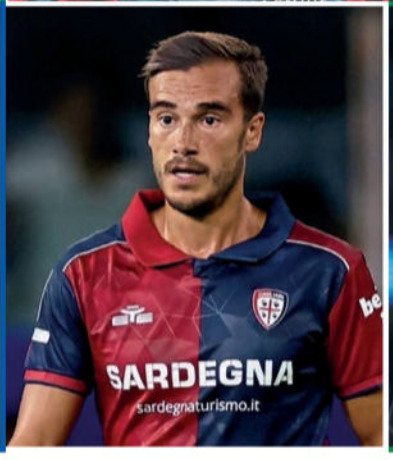
During the 1980s and 1990s, the Italian league's heyday, Platt, Souness and Francis all won silverware, while Gascoigne's move to Lazio helped bring the Italian league to a wider UK television audience.

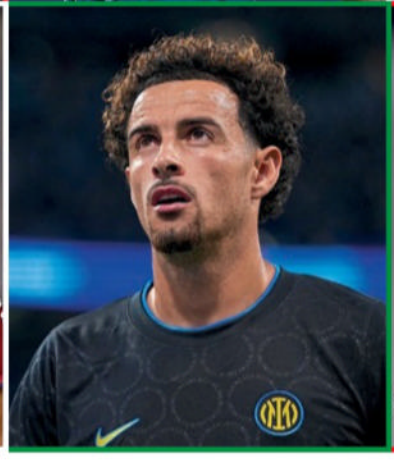
But the overall number was still relatively small. Throughout the '90s, only seven British players made the move to Italy's top division, and of them only three – Gascoigne, Platt and Paul Ince – stayed for longer than a season.

For the following two decades, there were next to none, with David Beckham's two loans at Milan providing a high-profile but rare exception.

Ten years ago, Joe Hart became Serie A's sole UK representative when he joined Torino on loan from Manchester City, but by the start of the current decade there were still only four.







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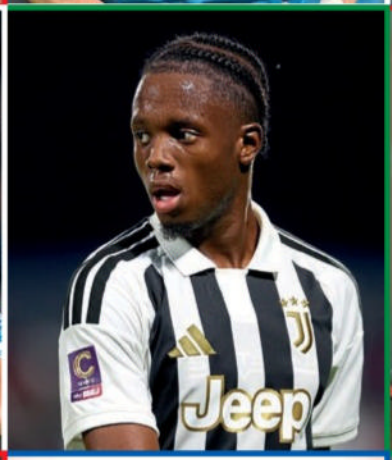
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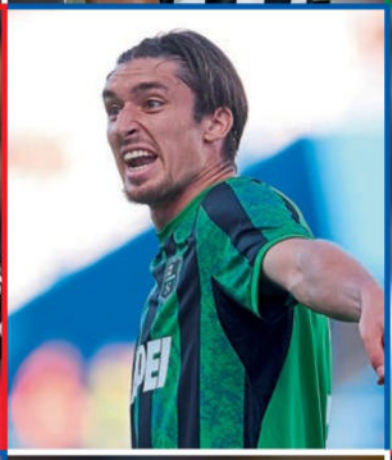

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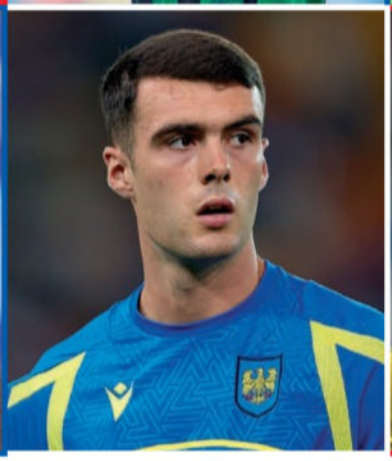


Selenella

This season, there are 24 – more than ever before, and also more than in La Liga, Ligue 1 and the Bundesliga combined. Thirteen of the league's 20 teams have at least one British player in their squad. In John Stones, Djed Spence and Curtis Jones, Inter have three – doubling the number they've had in their entire 118-year history.

German and French teams have also recruited more British imports in recent years, but they have tended to target emerging talent. Players moving to Italy, on the other hand, have been of a broader age range. McTominay moved to Napoli at 27 and John Stones at Inter is 32. When Ashley Young joined the *Nerazzurri* in 2020, he was six months short of his 35th birthday.

As well as Young and McTominay, Aaron Ramsey (with Juventus), Fikayo Tomori (Milan) and Billy Gilmour (Napoli) have helped their team become Italian champions. When Antonio Conte's Napoli won the *Scudetto* in 2025, McTominay was voted Serie A MVP. Tammy Abraham won the Conference League with Roma in 2022, while Lewis Ferguson helped Bologna qualify for the Champions League and lift the Coppa Italia. Further down the league, Keinan Davis will long be remembered for scoring the goal that saved Udinese from relegation in 2024, while Che Adams has scored more for Torino than fellow Scot Law.

Osian Roberts, the former Wales assistant coach who has spent the past three years with Como, believes that a change in mindset helps to explain the rise of British players in Italy.

"There is a greater desire now to travel, to experience different cultures," he tells *World Soccer*. "We have Trevoh Chalobah here now. He had several years in the Premier League and wanted to experience something different in a nice location and have the opportunity to learn a new language, which these days appeals to the modern footballer a bit more than it used to. They see that as part of life now."

Young, a Premier League champion with Manchester United, moved to Inter in January 2020 and within 18 months had won the *Scudetto* – the first Englishman to do so since Gerry Hitchens in 1963.

"Looking back on my time there, I loved every minute of it. It was brilliant," he tells *World Soccer*. "The club as a whole was fantastic and I loved every part of it.

Scots in Naples... Scott McTominay and Billy Gilmour

Brits battle...Ainsley Maitland-Niles takes on Aaron Hickey in the 2021-22 season

"Playing out there, I found it was slower paced, more man to man. A lot of teams played 3-5-2 with wing-backs, so it was totally different to England. It took me a few training sessions, a few games to fully understand Antonio Conte's way of playing. But I felt I adapted really well to it."

Conte has been an important link between the two nations. As well as Young, the ex-Chelsea and Tottenham manager also brought McTominay and Gilmour to Italy, while Cagliari midfielder Harry Winks has cited his former coach as a key influence in convincing him to make the move.

"I've had a lot of managers in my career, but he [Conte] was really the first with whom I saw football in a different way tactically," said Winks of Conte, his manager at Spurs, in an interview with *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. "It was a good experience."

Winks spent the 2022-23 season on loan at Sampdoria, and returned to Italy last summer to sign for Cagliari.

"I think British players are looking more seriously at Serie A as an interesting opportunity," he added. "They see a different kind of football. In the

Scudetto winner ...Ashley Young spent 18 months at Internazionale

> "British players are becoming more sought after because they've played in the Premier League, playing at such a high intensity"
>
> Former Internazionale wing-back Ashley Young

Premier League, physicality, strength and athleticism are important. In Serie A, however, you play football. You go deeper into the tactical aspects."

Roberts agrees.

"Serie A is a highly tactical league," he says. "It's not as intense as the Premier League but, from top to bottom, it's competitive. It's not easy to win games. If you want to go to a league where you still have to be at your best and you can't take your foot off the throttle, Serie A meets that need."

In the past, there was a perception that British players could not meet those demands. But not anymore.

"British players are held in high esteem here," adds Roberts. "The Premier League gives them credibility because of its quality from top to bottom. The assumption, nine times out of ten, is that if you can play in the Premier League, the transition to play in Serie A should be fairly straightforward.

"The British style lends itself quite well to Serie A in particular because it's a more physical league, there's more contact. McTominay is a great example of how a player can make a big impact over here. Then, of course, when they come over and have success it opens the door for others."

When Stones, Spence and Jones signed for Inter in the summer, the club president Beppe Marotta claimed that adding that Premier League intensity would benefit the whole team.

"I think British players are becoming more sought after because they've played in the Premier League, playing at such a high intensity," says Young. "Tactics also play a big part. A lot of teams now in England are adopting tactics used in Italy, playing 3-5-2 at times, so players can go there and play in the same way."

Financial constraints in the Italian game have been another significant factor. No longer able to compete with the Premier League, many Serie A clubs scour the European transfer market seeking value for money.

With its relatively low transfer fees and wages, the Scottish game has proven to be a particularly fertile ground. Ferguson, Kieron Bowie, Lennon Miller, Josh Doig and Liam Henderson were all signed directly from Scottish clubs.

The appeal is twofold. As well as the players arriving relatively cheaply, there is the chance to sell them to the Premier League for a significant profit. Aaron Hickey, for example, joined Bologna from Hearts for around €1.7 million in 2020, and was sold to Brentford for £18.6m just two years later.

According to Roberts, technical advances in scouting players have also helped clubs in Italy to recruit more successfully in the British market.

"When Ian Rush went to Juventus, he was the best at defending from the front," he explains. "They wanted him to play like he did for Liverpool, but when he went to press the defenders, he found the rest of the team were all on the halfway line. They played a completely different style.

"These days there is far more analysis of players to make sure they fit into your style of play. When Como were looking at Trevoh Chalobah, we had a specific tactical fit that we were looking for. When he came in, we knew that his strengths were what we needed."

A change in the rules in Italy regarding the import of foreign players has also played a part.

Since 2011, Serie A clubs have only been allowed to sign two non-European Union players each season. Three years ago, however, the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) amended its regulations to permit those from the United Kingdom and Switzerland to be treated as EU citizens.

This pathway has allowed clubs to sign one British player per season in addition to two others from outside the European Union – allowing Inter to sign Stones, Spence and Jones in a single transfer window.

Serie A may never recapture its glory years, when it was the world's most exciting, high-quality and glamorous top flight, but it will always retain an appeal for British players.

"I think the Italian league is getting better," concludes Young. "There was a time, years and years ago, when it was fantastic and I think it's coming back now."

BRITS IN SERIE A IN 2026-27

- Jonathan **ROWE**, *Atalanta*
- Lewis **FERGUSON**, *Bologna*
- Harry **WINKS**, *Cagliari*
- Demi **AKARAKIRI**, *Cagliari*
- Trevoh **CHALOBAH**, *Como*
- Cody **DRAMEH**, *Genoa*
- John **STONES**, *Internazionale*
- Djed **SPENCE**, *Internazionale*
- Curtis **JONES**, *Internazionale*
- Lloyd **KELLY**, *Juventus*
- Justin **OBOAVWODUO**, *Juventus*
- Fikayo **TOMORI**, *Milan*
- Ruben **LOFTUS-CHEEK**, *Milan*
- Omari **HUTCHINSON**, *Milan*
- Omari **FORSON**, *Monza*
- Jay **ROBINSON**, *Monza*
- Billy **GILMOUR**, *Napoli*
- Scott **McTOMINAY**, *Napoli*
- Kieron **BOWIE**, *Sassuolo*
- Josh **DOIG**, *Sassuolo*
- Che **ADAMS**, *Torino*
- Nathan **PATTERSON**, *Torino*
- Keinan **DAVIS**, *Udinese*
- Lennon **MILLER**, *Udinese*

ESTUDIANTES' WITCHCRAFT

How Juan Sebastian Veron guided his boyhood club to the 2009 Copa Libertadores

Words: Tim Vickery

Founded in 1905 by, as the name might suggest, students, Estudiantes of La Plata are known in Argentina as the "*Pincharratas*", the rat pokers. The nickname's most likely origin is that many of the club's founding members were studying medicine, and spent some of their academic hours poking around with laboratory rodents. In reality though, Estudiantes is the mouse that keeps on roaring.

Some 40 miles southeast of Buenos Aires, La Plata is dwarfed by Argentina's dominant capital. With a population of under a million, La Plata's two clubs, Estudiantes and Gimnasia, should hardly be able to compete with the traditional giants. But in the last couple of years, it has been Estudiantes carrying the fight to the Brazilians in the Copa Libertadores.

And that is right in the club's tradition. Estudiantes became synonymous with the competition in the late 1960s, when they got their hands on the trophy long before Boca Juniors and River Plate. They won the competition three times in a row between 1968 and 1970 – although the feat was much easier then than it is now. The format at the time was a little like boxing: the champion entering the action in the closing stages, making them hard to dethrone. Even so, it was a remarkable feat for what had long been seen as a minor club to win South America's premier club title three times over.

In between the late 1960s glory days and the recent renaissance, there came one other key moment: the 2009 Copa Libertadores, when they beat Cruzeiro of Brazil in a two-legged final to claim a fourth title.

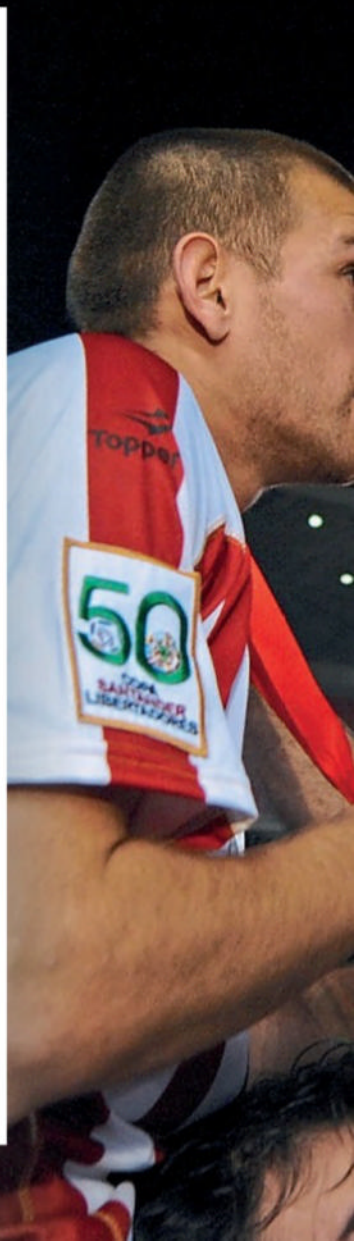
One surname runs all the way through from the 1960s to 2009 and on to the present day: Veron.

The team that put the club on the map had the characteristics of Don Revie's Leeds United of the 1960s and '70s – they were tough to play against, hard (excessively so at times) and very well prepared, drilled in set-piece routines, well aware of tactical and mental weak points in their opponents.

But they could also play, especially the hugely talented attacking midfielder Juan Ramon Veron, known as *La Bruja* (The Witch). *La Brujita* (The Little Witch) is his son, Juan Sebastian Veron, now the club's combative and deeply committed president.

"Seba" Veron, of course, also wore the club's colours. He was the key man in that side that not only won the 2009 Libertadores, but also, later that year, came within a few seconds of a famous upset in the Club World Cup final against the Barcelona of Lionel Messi and Pep Guardiola.

La Brujita was born into different times from those of his father. By the time he made his Estudiantes debut in 1994, South American football had already become an export industry. He helped the team win promotion back to the first division, but then moved to Boca Juniors in 1996 and then quickly on to Italy, where he starred for Sampdoria, Parma and Lazio, winning a *Scudetto* with the latter. Spells in England with Manchester United and, especially, Chelsea were not so rewarding, but he made a splendid return to Italy, adding another league title with Internazionale.



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The final...Estudiantes players line up before the second leg against Brazilians Cruzeiro

He could easily have stayed. Inter would have been delighted. But he felt the call of home, the need to emulate some of what his father had done with Estudiantes. And so in 2006, taking pay cuts along the way, investing in training facilities from his own pocket, he started a glorious spell of his own in the red and white stripes.

It was an immediate success. Under Diego Simeone, Estudiantes played an excellent tournament in the 2006-07 Apertura. There was a morale-boosting 7-0 win against local rivals Gimnasia, and Estudiantes finished the season level on points with Boca Juniors. A play-off was needed, and Estudiantes came through 2-1 to claim their first title in 23 years.

National championships were all very well, but after those great, heady days of the late 1960s, the Libertadores was always going to be the club's main event. After losing the 1971 final to Nacional of Uruguay, they had made little headway in the competition, with the exception of a semi-final appearance in 1983, a time when the club had a fine side, built around the subtle talents of the former Leeds and Sheffield United playmaker Alejandro Sabella. He, too, was to play a massive part in the 2009 triumph.

Estudiantes went into that Libertadores campaign coached by Leonardo Astrada. They made an uneasy start, edging past the dangerous Sporting Cristal of Peru on away goals in the qualifying round.

They opened up the group campaign with a tough task, away to Cruzeiro of Brazil, and came home smarting from a 3-0 drubbing. A laboured 1-0 win at home to Bolivia's Universitario de Sucre followed, but then they went down again away from home, losing by the only goal to Deportivo Quito of Ecuador. Astrada was sacked, and in came Sabella for his first managerial role.

> One surname runs all the way through from the 1960s to 2009 and on to the present day: Veron

Sabella had spent years as assistant to Daniel Passarella, but now chose to branch out on his own. It was the start of a brief but notable coaching career. He was only in charge of two teams; success with Estudiantes got him the Argentina job, and he took them all the way to the final of the 2014 World Cup.

Quiet, low-profile and with an avuncular wisdom, Sabella made an immediate impact. Up until that point, Estudiantes had lost all three of their away games. They did not lose again, and won the title with victories on the road in the quarters, semis and, decisively, in the big final. Meanwhile, they went through the entire campaign without conceding a single goal at home.

Sabella had some solid building blocks to construct his defence with. Keeper Mariano Andujar was steadiness personified. Ahead of him, Rolando Schiavi and Leandro Desabato were a pair of aggressive, old-school, no-frills Argentine centre-backs. And in front of them, holding midfielder Rodrigo Brana was a yapping little guard dog who screened the space and did the simple things.

But it was in the creative midfield sector that the team really excelled. There was young Enzo Perez, a dynamic, emerging all-round talent who, five years later with Sabella as his coach, would play in the World Cup final. There was the classy Leandro Benitez, elegant owner of an excellent left foot. But most of

all there was Juan Sebastian Veron.

Many Premier League fans have little notion of just how good he was. His time at Chelsea was undermined by injuries. With Manchester United there were some fine displays in the Champions League, but it never really seemed clear why he had been acquired. There were times when United even used him in front of the line of the ball, with his back to goal, an obvious nonsense. Veron was a central midfielder who needed to have the full panorama of the field in front of him, because he could read the game, control its tempo, spot and play the pass with chilling precision.

It is no coincidence that his first European port of call was Sampdoria; the Genoa club saw him as a successor to Toninho Cerezo, the Brazilian who ran their midfield with such quality in the late 1980s and early '90s. Some would go further back in search of comparisons. One commentator likened Veron to a player from the age of black-and-white images, dictating matters with an unhurried air that carried a retro feel. This was peak Veron, playing where he wanted to play and how he wanted to play.

Match winner ...Mauro Boselli celebrates after scoring in the final

Mastermind... Estudiantes head coach Alejandro Sabella in 2009

Most South American stars of the last few decades would readily concede that they spent their prime years in Europe. Veron's were split between Serie A and Estudiantes, with the depth of the emotional bond probably tipping the balance towards the latter.

The second striker, Gaston "Gata" Fernandez, would drop off and provide another attacking-midfield option – meaning that there were plenty of quality players loading the bullets for centre-forward Mauro Boselli to fire.

Not particularly quick or strong, Boselli was little more than an out-and-out finisher. In 2010, he became Wigan Athletic's record signing, and his failure to score a single Premier League goal played an unfortunate part in the club's relegation. It was a predictable disaster; at Wigan, Boselli was a luxury the team could not afford. But at Estudiantes, the best midfield in South America provided an overflowing stream of chances for him, and he did the rest. His goal won the 2009 Libertadores.

There were comfortable wins in the knockout stages over Libertad of Paraguay followed by the Uruguayan pair of Defensor and Nacional to set up a rematch with Cruzeiro in the final.

The first leg, at home, ended in a tight and attritional goalless draw. Everything would come to a climax on July 15 in the same place where five months earlier their campaign had got off to such a poor start. Back Estudiantes went to the imposing Mineirao stadium in Belo Horizonte to face Cruzeiro, whose star midfielder Ramires was playing his last game before moving to Chelsea.

The Brazilians took the lead early in the second half, a long-range shot from midfielder Henrique taking a deflection past Andujar. Estudiantes were soon level, Veron playing into space for their on-rushing right-back Christian Cellay to curl a cross between the defensive line and goalkeeper Fabio (who, at 46, was still in fine form for Fluminense in this year's Libertadores) and allowing Fernandez to turn neatly home.

The winner came from a Veron corner from the right, Boselli in typical poaching mode getting in front of his marker to nod downwards back across the goal. It was to not only seal the fourth Libertadores title for Estudiantes, but also the fourth for the Veron family.

For his part, Veron was named South American Footballer of the Year for the second year in a row.

"Veron is the most important player in the entire history of Estudiantes," said Sabella in the aftermath of the final. "He grew up here, he has a history in this club before being born, but he made his path from being 'the son of' to the point that his father became 'the father of'."

***La Brujita*...Juan Sebastian Veron kisses the Copa Libertadores**

TANZANIA

League FOCUS

Dominant... rivals Simba and Young Africans clash during a Kariakoo derby in 2023
Credit: Alamy

2026-27 TEAMS

- Azam
- Coastal Union
- Dodoma Jiji
- Fountain Gate
- Geita Gold
- JKT Tanzania
- Kagera Sugar
- Mashujaa
- Mbeya City
- Namungo
- Pamba
- Polisi Tanzania
- Simba
- Singida Black Stars
- TRA United
- Young Africans

TANZANIAN PREMIER LEAGUE: A BRIEF HISTORY

Tanzania has had an organised league for more than a century, first starting in 1921, although initially based only in the capital Dar-es-Salaam. A first national league was organised in 1965, four years after independence, but had only five clubs and was restricted to teams on the mainland. From 1983, the top two finishers then took on the top two clubs from Zanzibar in what was called the Union League until that was abandoned in 2003. The island of Zanzibar is politically part of Tanzania but in footballing terms autonomous. Tanzania's league was rebranded the Premier League in 1997.

THE FORMAT

In the 2015-16 season, the size of the league was increased from 14 clubs to 16, jumping to 20 clubs in the 2018-19 season, then back down to 18 clubs after two seasons and then immediately down to 16 again for the 2021-22 campaign. Tanzania's coefficient over the last five years of continental competition has gone up to fifth in the CAF rankings, which means they can enter their top two league finishers in the Champions League and third-placed side plus cup winners into the Confederation Cup. In the league, two sides are promoted up from the Championship and the bottom two clubs in the Premier League are relegated with one more potential promotion place decided in the post-season play-offs.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*Runners-up*	*Last title*
Young Africans	16	7	2025-26
Simba	11	9	2020-21
Azam	1	6	2013-14
Prisons	1	2	1999
Maji Maji	1	0	1998

**Since 1997 when the Premier League was rebranded*

Will a club other than Simba or Young Africans win the Tanzanian Premier League title ever again?
For the time being, probably not. The league is essentially a support act for the two Dar-es-Salaam clubs who have won every Tanzanian league title since 2000, save for the surprise 2013-14 campaign when Azam, who are also based in the capital, won their first and only title.

The rivalry between Simba and Young Africans (who are better known as Yanga) is among the most intense on the continent, and the two clubs enjoy vast support across the country. Tanzanians, almost to a man, support one of them, with no empathy for the other. Their Kariakoo derby clashes at the Benjamin Mkapa Stadium draw overflowing crowds at the 60,000-capacity venue.

The two clubs are also the play-things of local billionaires. Mo Dewji is the long-time president and funder of Simba, while Ghalib Said Mohamed is Yanga's backer and, according to the club, gave them almost US$6 million this season to recruit players – a veritable fortune in African terms.

Azam try to compete with the top two with their financial benefactor being Said Salim Bakhresa, another rich industrialist, but are still a long way behind.

How do the two Dar-es-Salaam giants stay ahead of the pack?
It is not too difficult given that they are both national institutions. A quick glance down any street in the capital and within minutes you'll see someone wearing a replica jersey of one of the two clubs. There is massive marketing, connected to the sponsoring companies and with all of their products endorsed by the clubs.

Both also run huge social media teams. Simba have more than eight million followers on Instagram and Yanga more than five million. They both host pre-season fan days where they stage a few matches featuring the junior and women's teams and throw a pop concert in for the supporters, who fill up the 60,000 seats with ease.

How much talent is there that can be exported to bigger leagues?
In over 60 years of independence, Tanzanian football has had only one high-profile export – and even then, Mbwana Samatta's spell at Aston Villa was all too brief. He joined the Villans in January 2020 but by the following September was at Fenerbahce in Turkey, and currently plies his trade with Le Havre in Ligue 1.

There are only two other current Tanzania internationals playing in strong European leagues – Kelvin John at AaB in Denmark and Novatus Miroshi with Turkish outfit Goztepe – but they both left African football as teenagers.

Few players make it out of Tanzania because, according to a former director of coaching in the country, there are only a few junior structures and those are marred by age cheating.

Tanzania's Under-20 side have only twice qualified for the biennial African championship since first entering in 1997. The Under-17 side, however, are competing at this year's World Cup in Qatar, and the country also sent a team to the recent Under-15 World Cup in Azerbaijan.

Can improving results in African club competition see Tanzania improve national team results?
The Tanzanian league is currently ranked the fifth strongest in Africa, and Simba and Yanga have again both reached the group stage of this year's CAF Champions League (more on page 86). But these improved results come on the back of imported players from elsewhere on the continent. Each side in the league is allowed 12 foreigners and wages are comparable with many of the top clubs in West Africa, so there is not a reliable pipeline of local talent for the national team – a real cause for concern ahead of co-hosting the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations finals next June.

Mark Gleeson

ONE TO WATCH

Selemani MWALIMU

(Young Africans)

The promising attacker was only a teenager when he was signed by Wydad Casablanca in 2025, and competed at that summer's Club World Cup for the Moroccans, but returned home soon after, spending last season on loan at Simba. Earlier this summer, in a controversial transfer, Yanga got Wydad to loan the player to them for the 2026-27 campaign instead of their rivals. Only 20 years old, Mwalimu is already into double figures for caps for Tanzania's national team, and scored his first goal for his country in a 2026 World Cup qualifier against Congo in September 2025. Should he continue his rapid rise, Mwalimu could, in the near future, become one of the few Tanzanians to play in a major European league.

Young Africans... Yanga supporters watch their team during the derby
Credit: Alamy

International FOCUS

KAZAKHSTAN

More than two decades on from the country's decision to leave Asian football for UEFA, are Kazakhstan any closer to achieving their footballing ambitions?

The club-v-country debate in Kazakhstan is somewhat different than the rest of the world. Back in 2002, the country left the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and headed off to Europe in search of higher standards of football and higher streams of revenue. It has been a success, but only up to a point: Kazakh teams participate in the UEFA Champions League, the most prestigious and lucrative club competition in the world, but the national team is still nowhere near reaching the World Cup.

An alternative view can be seen across the 1,450-mile long border with Uzbekistan. The two shared much of the 20th century as part of the Soviet Union, during which there was an intense rivalry between the two nations' leading clubs, Kairat of Almaty and Tashkent's Pakhtakor. But since independence in 1991, they have been on different footballing paths. Thirty-five years on, it was Uzbekistan who became the first Central Asian nation to qualify for the World Cup.

Going forward, the White Wolves are expected to challenge for the Asian Cup, expected to host (or co-host) the continental tournament in the next decade and to also keep returning to the global stage for the foreseeable future. The country also has the biggest star in Central Asian football – centre-back Abdukodir Khusanov is now well

Europe or Asia?... Kazakhstan line up ahead of a World Cup qualifier v Belgium

Flying the flag ...Kairat players celebrate scoring against Arsenal in last season's UEFA Champions League

established in the Premier League with Manchester City – and has enjoyed increasing success at youth level in Asia.

"Compared to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan has made great strides in football development – they were the first in Central Asia to reach the World Cup, and Khusanov is now playing in the English Premier League," says former Manchester United winger Andrei Kanchelskis, who has worked in both countries. "Yes, Kazakhstan has some good players, but persistent problems hinder progress. Uzbekistan's infrastructure is now among the best in the post-Soviet space."

At a national team level, Uzbekistan seem to be ahead – certainly in terms of FIFA's rankings. At the end of the lengthy window across September and October, the AFC team was 59th, almost 60 places ahead of the Kazakhs, way down in 117th.

But there is more to this debate than just the state of the national teams.

"In Kazakhstan there is a lot of discussion about what Uzbekistan have done," said Alisher Nikimbaev, a former official at the Uzbekistan Football Association. "Some people regret joining UEFA, but then there is the success of Kairat in joining the Champions League group stage. So there is a debate: do you prefer to go to the AFC and try to qualify for the World Cup because it is easier? Or do you prefer to stay in UEFA and achieve more in club football?"

Kairat, based in Kazakhstan's biggest city, Almaty, may have ended last season's group stage with just one point, but that does not tell the full story. There was the odd thrashing, such as the 5-0 home defeat to Real Madrid, but there was a narrow 2-1 loss at Internazionale and a 3-2 defeat in North London against Arsenal. It meant 36th place out of 36 but it wasn't a humiliation and, perhaps more importantly, brought in millions of euros to the club's coffers.

The AFC Champions League Elite is a pale imitation of the European version in terms of money, prestige and standard. Even in the Conference League, UEFA's third competition, Kairat can achieve similar levels of prize money to what they would in Asia's top competition. Uzbek teams have not made the last four in over a decade and don't look capable of challenging the cash-up Saudi clubs.

If Kazakhstan can make it to the World Cup, or even the European Championship, then there would be no debate at all. Uzbekistan had to wait 35 years for a first World Cup appearance, which included many near-misses, but their neighbours have not yet even reached that point.

Back in their AFC days, Kazakhstan made it to the last stage in qualification

Central Asian rivals... Uzbekistan competed at this year's World Cup

for the 1998 World Cup. They were unbeaten at home in the second group stage, but didn't pick up enough points on the road. Four years later, they missed out on advancing from the first group stage on goal difference.

That was their final Asian campaign before heading west, but the team have not come as close to the global stage via the European routes. In 58 UEFA qualifiers for the World Cup, Kazakhstan have won just five games, two of which came against Liechtenstein on the road to North America 2026.

As was the case with Uzbekistan, who played in a number of Asian Cups before finally reaching the global stage, Kazakhstan need to make their mark on the continental stage first, but a first European Championship has yet to happen. Indeed, it got so bad during qualification for Euro 2012, when the team had gone five games without a point or even scoring a goal, that Tourism and Sports Minister Temirkhan Dosmukhambetov talked about a possible return to Asia. There was a debate but, ultimately, it didn't go anywhere, due, once again, to the benefits for the clubs.

"UEFA means not just better football but better promotion," pundit Mikhail Vasilyev told *Radio Free Europe*, pointing to Astana becoming the first Kazakh team to reach the UEFA Champions League group stage where it earned millions. "Playing in these competitions allowed clubs to attract better quality players from abroad and better quality trainers, and so local players have to raise their game to become more competitive," he added.

> "Do you prefer to go to the AFC and try to qualify for the World Cup? Or do you prefer to stay in UEFA and achieve more in club football?"
>
> **Alisher Nikimbaev, former Uzbekistan Football Association official**

Has it helped raise standards for the national team? A little. In qualification for Euro 2024, the team won six of their ten games, including an impressive 2-1 away win in Finland and an unforgettable 3-2 victory over the Danes in front of 29,000 delirious fans at the Astana Arena. They qualified for the play-offs via their Nations League performance, but were comprehensively beaten 5-0 by Greece in Athens.

Nevertheless, there were enough signs that they had something to build on. Scott Munn, former CEO of the City Football Group and Chief Football

Captain...Nuraly Alip wins a tackle for Kazakhstan

BEST XI

Officer of Tottenham Hotspur, was appointed as General Secretary of the Kazakhstan Football Federation in April of this year. In August, the experienced John van 't Schip became head coach.

The target is obvious, Euro 2028, but results in September and October weren't great with UEFA Nations League defeats to Slovakia and Moldova and twin draws with the Faroe Islands.

Improvements are needed if there are not to be more envious glances over the border into Uzbekistan.

John Duerden

Wonderkid... Dastan Satpayev

MANAGER

John VAN 'T SCHIP

The Canadian-born ex-Netherlands international winger worked previously with KFF General Secretary Scott Munn at Melbourne City, part of the City Football Group. That was just one stop on a worldwide coaching tour which, as well as Australia, has also taken in Ajax (where he spent most of his playing career), Guadalajara in Mexico as well as the national teams of Greece and Armenia.

Now 62, he still likes his teams to play on the front foot, to take the initiative and get forward. That hasn't yet been much in evidence in Kazakhstan with both displays and results in the first four UEFA Nations League games less than great. He won't need reminding that, last year, he was let go by Armenia after only four games in charge.

As a coach, he hasn't lifted the same trophies he did as a player but hero status awaits the coach who can take this ambitious nation to a major tournament.

STAR PLAYER

Nuraly ALIP

Mr Reliable, Alip is not only the captain of the national team but the mainstay of the defence. The left-footed centre-back is calm in possession, aggressive in the tackle and good in the air. Only 26, he has years to keep piling up that experience to help his national team. It was striking that, in the four Nations League games, Alip not only played all 360-plus minutes but also scored two goals. "Remember, he's actually a defender. His second goal in a row for the national team," his wife said on social media.

He won the Kazakhstan Premier League in 2020 with Kairat and caught the eye to the extent that he was loaned to Zenit Saint Petersburg in 2022 and did enough to land a permanent deal soon after. He has stayed by the banks of the Neva ever since, winning the Russian Premier League four times and numerous domestic cups.

ONE TO WATCH

Dastan SATPAYEV

It was big, big news when the forward signed for Chelsea in the summer, but the 18-year-old is used to making headlines. He made his debut for Kairat as a 15-year-old in a cup game and then, a few months later, scored on his league debut and was soon finding the net in European club competitions too.

At 16, he became the youngest-ever player to appear for Kazakhstan, and the domestic media's comparisons to Kylian Mbappe had started even before he scored his first international goal against Belgium in November 2025.

In July came the move to Stamford Bridge and the subsequent loan to Burnley. Life in the Championship for a teenage forward from Almaty should be quite the experience but with pace and sharpness in front of goal, it may only be a matter of time before Kazakhstan have their first Premier League star.

Glenn Moore

2027 World Cup qualifying nears its conclusion

All but three of the 32 teams for next summer's finals will be confirmed by early December

A qualifying process that began in Juba, South Sudan, on February 19, 2025, is almost over. By the time the finals draw takes place on December 11, all but three of the qualifiers for next year's Women's World Cup will be confirmed.

Joining the 18 teams who have already booked a place in Brazil will be a quartet emerging from the CONCACAF W Championship and another seven from UEFA's qualifying process. That will leave just the three winners of the inter-confederation play-offs to come.

The main focus will be in Europe where so far four teams have qualified – Nations League A group winners Spain, Germany, France and Denmark – while another 32 countries went into a two-round knockout, giving them a minimum of ten matches to qualify.

This has been met with some criticism, notably in England who were miffed that five wins in six matches, the sole defeat being to holders Spain who were beaten in the Wembley reverse fixture, has not been enough.

Sarina Wiegman's side thus had to beat Greece and will next have to get past Ukraine, when she would rather have been honing personnel and tactics with elite friendlies, which is what the likes of Spain, the United States, Brazil and Japan have been doing.

The first task was achieved 8-1 on aggregate and, given that the Lionesses beat Ukraine 9-1 over two games in the group stage, the second hurdle will surely be safely overcome too. Indeed, the FA are so confident that they have already handed their Dutch coach a contract extension to 2029.

Critics have also made note of the predictability of the results. The 16 first-round ties went entirely to Nations League seeding except for 21st-ranked Finland beating 15th-ranked Serbia 6-2 on aggregate.

The eight second-round ties will take place in the first week of December. Seven of the winners will qualify for the finals, while the lowest-ranked team to win their tie will head into the inter-confederation play-offs.

Across the Atlantic, it is rather easier for the United States and Canada. Both were given byes to the CONCACAF W Championship and could thus reach Brazil by winning just one match.

The tournament will be held from November 27 to December 5 in Texas. An eight-team knockout competition, the four quarter-final winners will progress to the World Cup and the losers compete for two places in the inter-confederation play-offs.

> Joining the 18 teams who have already booked a place in Brazil will be a quartet from CONCACAF and another seven from UEFA's qualifying process

The other six participants qualified from groups, all but Haiti (who needed a point at home to Dominican Republic and got it) winning every game.

A seeded draw means USA face debutants El Salvador, ranked 78th in FIFA's rankings. The other ties should be more competitive with Canada playing Panama, Jamaica meeting Costa Rica and Haiti facing Mexico.

The winning quarter-finalists will also qualify for the Los Angeles Olympics (assuming USA is one of them).

USA warmed up with two matches against Spain, losing 2-0 in Washington D.C. when they conceded twice in the opening quarter-hour, then coming from 2-0 down in Pennsylvania to draw.

If that suggests there was rust it would be accurate. Emma Hayes' team may mostly be in late season domestically but had not played together since July. And while both sides were missing key players, Spain's ingrained teamwork usually enables back-up players to fit in quicker.

Other teams took advantage of the fixture window with further double-headers between Brazil and Argentina (3-1, 2-2) and Canada and Denmark (1-1, 3-4). In addition, Germany beat Australia 4-2 and Japan 2-1. In the next window, Brazil go to Japan for two games, while Spain will host South American nations Chile and Venezuela.

EUROPEAN WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

(32) **UKRAINE** v **ENGLAND** (4)
(22) **FINLAND** v **ITALY** (14)
(24) **PORTUGAL** v **ICELAND** (16)
(31) **WALES** v **NORWAY** (13)
(26) **SWITZERLAND** v **AUSTRIA** (25)
(23) **SCOTLAND** v **SWEDEN** (8)
(29) **POLAND** v **REPUBLIC OF IRELAND** (21)
(36) **SLOVENIA** v **NETHERLANDS** (11)

Warm-ups ...USA and Spain met in friendlies in October

2027 World Cup qualifying...Georgia Stanway scores for England v Greece

Meanwhile, in Morocco, the first phase of those inter-confederation play-offs will take place, also concluding on December 5.

South Africa, Uzbekistan, Chinese Taipei, Papua New Guinea, Ghana and Ecuador will contest a mini-league in which they will each play three opponents. The top two will join Venezuela plus the CONCACAF and UEFA entrants in a trio of one-off play-off ties in February 2027.

It's a long process, and a very global one highlighting how the women's game went truly worldwide far quicker than the men's.

This will be the tenth FIFA Women's World Cup, and around a third of the teams will be from Europe. The tenth men's World Cup, in 1974, featured ten European teams, three South American and three from the rest of the world. Even 20 years later, more than half of what was then a 24-team tournament were from Europe.

By contrast, the Women's World Cup was launched in 1991 with seven of the inaugural 12 from outside Europe. By the time the fifth edition was played, in 2011, Europe had five of 16 slots, including hosts Germany.

This matters, because it has helped counterbalance the difficulties many women have to contend with in regions where their rights are marginalised and/or female opportunities to play elite sport are very limited.

The global exposure of World Cups draws in investment from governments and sponsors. Talent is also showcased by the proliferation of FIFA age-group tournaments, such as the recent Under-20 and Under-17 World Cups, in which Nigeria defeated England and Ghana knocked out Argentina respectively, and the Olympics, a far more important competition in the women's calendar than the men's.

The results can be seen in the Ballon d'Or nominees. In the men's award, even in a World Cup year, Africa, CONCACAF and Asia garnered just three of the 30 nominees. In the women's, players from those federations earned nine.

Jamaica's Khadija Shaw was third with Melchie Dumornay, of Haiti, fourth. Malawi's Temwa Chawinga made the top ten, Zambia's Barbra Banda the top 20. There were a trio of Japanese players. In a lean year for the USA, hamstrung by the lack of a global tournament, only Rose Lavelle made the list, but CONCACAF was further represented by Mexico's Scarlett Camberos.

Next year's World Cup will produce more stars, but first those whose teams are yet to qualify need to make sure they are in the December 11 draw in Rio de Janeiro.

Round-up

South American champions ...Cruzeiro captain Byanca Brasil lifts the Copa Libertadores trophy

CRUZEIRO STUN CORINTHIANS

Debutants Cruzeiro won the Copa Libertadores Femenina in a dramatic final in Quito, Ecuador, beating Corinthians in a penalty shootout after a 4-4 draw.

After Gabi Zanotti scored twice in the first half, and Vic Albuquerque added another early in the second period to make it 3-0, Corinthians seemed destined for a fourth successive crown.

But Lele's 52nd-minute error enabled Byanca Brasil to give Cruzeiro hope and the goalkeeper then brought down Marilia for Vitoria Calhau to further reduce the deficit from the spot.

Vic Albuquerque soon made it 4-2 but with 15 minutes left, Ketlin headed in from a corner to set up a grandstand finish in which fellow substitute Leticia Ferreira headed in a stoppage-time equaliser.

Lele saved Pri Back's penalty but Jacqueline missed, sending the shootout into sudden death. Two more misses followed before Milena Ferriera scored.

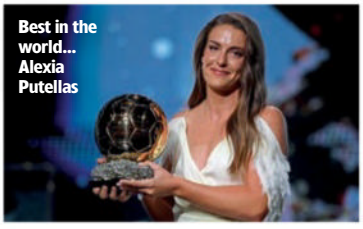
Cruzeiro keeper Camila Rodrigues had not had the greatest of games, but she guessed correctly to save Gi Fernandes' weak penalty and become the hero.

It was a double-blow to Corinthians, having lost the Campeonato Brasileiro play-off final to Sao Paulo earlier in the month, but revenge for Cruzeiro who had lost the 2025 league climax to Corinthians after topping the regular season table.

It was the eighth successive Brazilian success. Underlining their dominance of 14 matches played against other nationalities in this year's event, 12 were won and two drawn (Santa Fe knocking out Palmeiras on penalties in the quarter-finals).

PUTELLAS RECLAIMS BALLON D'OR

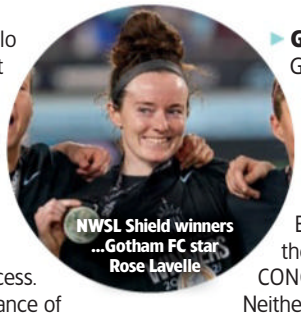
Champions League winners Barcelona almost swept the board at the Ballon d'Or presentation night with Alexia Putellas headlining. Now of London City Lionesses, the Spain midfielder regained the main honour from club and country team-mate Aitana Bonmati.



Best in the world... Alexia Putellas

Barca's quadruple-winning season also earned them Club of the Year, coach Pere Romeu the Johan Cruyff Trophy, youngster Vicky Lopez the Kopa Trophy, goalkeeper Cata Coll the Yashin Trophy, plus five places in the Ballon d'Or top eight including Ewa Pajor as runner-up.

Barca were denied only the top-scorer trophy, won by Mexican striker Charlyn Corral of Pachuca. Like the men's it is named the Gerd Muller Award but should surely be re-named, perhaps after Canada legend Christine Sinclair, the record women's international scorer.



NWSL Shield winners ...Gotham FC star Rose Lavelle

GOTHAM WIN SHIELD

Gotham FC won the 2026 NWSL Shield, finishing three points ahead of San Diego Wave to claim their first regular-season title. Both teams will represent the USA in next season's CONCACAF W Champions Cup.

Neither of the new franchises, Denver Summit or Boston Legacy, made the eight-team play-offs, finishing 10th and 13th respectively.

The play-offs conclude with the Championship final on November 21.

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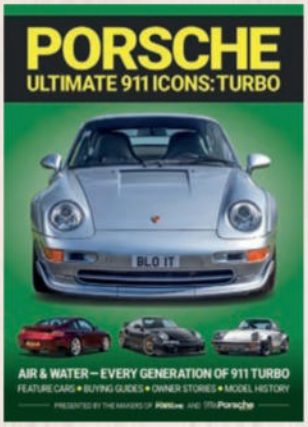

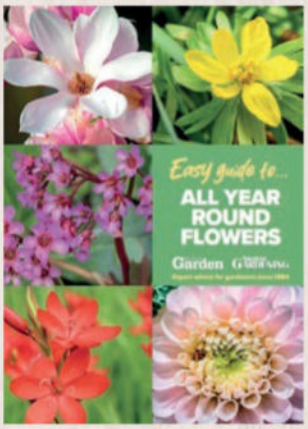

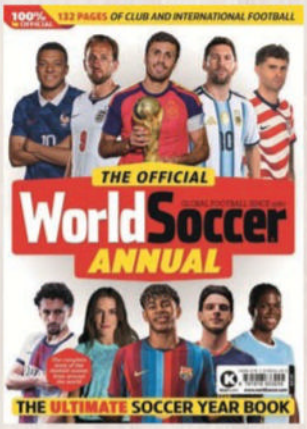

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Sudamericana final...Boca Juniors v Atletico Mineiro

South America

TIM VICKERY

Undercard outshines the main event in South America

Atletico Mineiro v Boca Juniors in the Copa Sudamericana final has the potential to outdo the Copa Libertadores a week later

The final of the Copa Sudamericana, set to take place in Barranquilla, Colombia on November 21, is a chance for two teams to not only grab a trophy but also a much-needed boost to their international prestige.

For Brazilians Atletico Mineiro, it is a third attempt at continental glory in as many years. The Belo Horizonte club did not do themselves justice in the 2024 Copa Libertadores final, going down 3-1 to compatriots Botafogo, and then produced an anodyne display in last season's Sudamericana final, losing to Lanus of Argentina on penalties after a goalless draw.

Now, they're hoping it'll be third time lucky with yet another Argentine coach – their fourth this decade.

The bearded, darkly Rasputin-esque Eduardo Dominguez has done well since making the difficult decision to leave Estudiantes (now Libertadores finalists) in February and take charge of an ailing team. He has constructed a new side in which the midfield lungpower of former Manchester United man Fred, back in Brazil after 13 years in Europe, has proved an excellent addition.

Dominguez was attracted by the deeper pockets of Brazilian football, and now has a chance to use those resources against a glamour side from his native country.

In the opposite corner is a rejuvenated Boca Juniors, who overcame two Brazilian teams on their way to the final.

Boca played a very poor first half of 2026, and fell into the Sudamericana as a consequence of finishing third in their Libertadores group. This prompted a coaching change, with the club's former left-back Rodolfo Arruabarrena brought in for his second spell in charge, having previously won two domestic trophies with the club between 2014 and 2016. He oversaw the rapid promotion of two promising youngsters, central defender Facundo "Jagger" Herrera and 19-year-old winger Leonel Flores. After making his senior debut in July, Flores was playing for the national team in early October, amid hopes that Argentina might have unearthed a Di Maria-type talent.

Goal grabber ...Bernard has hit five goals in Atletico Mineiro's run to the final

The knockout phase was a roller-coaster ride for the Buenos Aires giants. In the play-offs they needed penalties to see off Chilean side O'Higgins, a 7-1 aggregate thumping of Paraguayan outfit Recoleta followed in the last 16, before they squeezed past Brazil's Sao Paulo in the quarter-finals.

In the semi-finals they faced Vasco da Gama, and after losing the first leg 1-0 at home had a mountain to climb in Rio de Janeiro. But the game was overshadowed by a drawn-out and dispiriting soap opera.

In their best run in the competition since 2011, Vasco wanted to host the clash at their Sao Januario stadium, a tight and historic ground, but CONMEBOL deemed its capacity insufficient for a semi-final.

The Maracana was then requested instead, but the giant arena is run by a Flamengo-Fluminense consortium, who were dead set against allowing Vasco to set foot on their pitch. The terms of the contract allow Vasco to host four games a year in the stadium

Semi-final winner... Boca Juniors' Leandro Paredes celebrates scoring against Vasco da Gama

– which was, after all, built with vast sums of public money, some of which came from Vasco supporters. But the consortium kept finding justifications for not handing over the ground, and a legal battle ensued.

The deadline soon passed, and CONMEBOL threatened to take the game to Paraguay. But, with their legal resources used up, the consortium had to give way and the match went ahead.

On the pitch, Boca's midfield maestro Leandro Paredes – who had missed the first leg through injury – returned for the last 35 minutes, but that proved enough. With Boca leading 2-1, the aggregate scores level and penalties looming, he produced a magnificent long-range shot to decide matters and set up an enticing clash with Atletico.

Indeed, this final is arguably an even more attractive prospect than the Copa Libertadores decider.

With a team in each of the continental finals, then, Argentina stands between Brazil and a clean sweep of the titles. But what about the rest of South America?

Once again the continent's success story was Ecuador, who got two teams through to the Libertadores last eight, where Independiente del Valle and LDU Quito put up stiff resistance. Of the other countries, Chile, Colombia and Paraguay said farewell to the Copa Libertadores in the second round. Bolivia, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela had lost their representatives in the group stage.

If Ecuador are the continent's overachievers, Colombia are the opposite. True, in the Sudamericana Santa Fe did manage to dump out River Plate after an epic penalty shootout. But the most noteworthy thing here was not the display of the Colombians, but a disastrous result for the other Buenos Aires giants, who theoretically should be best equipped to challenge the Brazilians.

If anything can threaten Brazilian football's domination of the continent, it might come from an internal change.

As it stands, Brazil's clubs can have nine foreign players on their team sheet, and the big hitters are using, or getting close to, their full complement. But that limit is set to be reduced, at a rate of one player per year, until a new limit of five is reached in 2030. The stated aim of Brazil's FA, in addition to giving more opportunities for young Brazilians, is to arrest a trend whereby the average age of the major Brazilian clubs has been creeping upwards.

This final is arguably an even more attractive prospect than the Copa Libertadores decider

If this change prevents Brazilian clubs from picking up the best talent from around the rest of the continent, weakening the other leagues in the process, then there is a real possibility of more balanced continental competitions in the next decade. Perhaps the end is in sight for Brazil's era of dominance.

Copa Sudamericana final host...the Estadio Metropolitano Roberto Melendez in Barranquilla, Colombia

United States

JAMES NALTON

5 Things...

...from the 2026 MLS regular season

1 NASHVILLE LEAD THE WAY

Nashville SC were the best team in Major League Soccer by some distance during the 2026 regular season, taking home the Supporters' Shield for the first time in their short history after topping the overall table.

A collection of MLS-leading designated players – Hany Mukhtar, Sam Surridge and Cristian Espinoza – plus some shrewd squad-building around them, produced a regular season campaign in which they boasted the league's best defensive record and one of its best attacks.

Such a combination also saw them finish the league season unbeaten at their Geodis Park home.

The primary source of goals was the classic centre-forward Surridge, who cut his teeth back home in English football with the likes of Bournemouth, Yeovil Town and Nottingham Forest before becoming a star in Tennessee.

Surridge has been top goalscorer in Nashville for the past three campaigns, while 2026 free-agent signing Espinoza led the club's assists charts this term and their 2022 MLS MVP Mukhtar recorded the most goals and assists combined.

This Supporters' Shield success builds on last year's US Open Cup win, as B. J. Callaghan's side now turn their attention to play-off progress and a tilt at the MLS Cup.

Deadly duo... Nashville front two Sam Surridge and Hany Mukhtar

2 MESSI REMAINS MAGIC, BUT MIAMI DISAPPOINT

As the regular season drew to a close and teams around MLS put forward their candidates for the league's Most Valuable Player award, there has been one, somewhat predictable but nevertheless brilliant, standout performer in 2026.

While some players specialise in goalscoring and others in creating, Messi has hung around the top of both the goals and assists charts all season. The problem is that his team haven't matched his quality.

Despite finishing near the top of the Eastern Conference, Inter Miami have been far from convincing. Head coach Javier Mascherano departed early in the season, and the team conceded more than double the number of goals as league leaders Nashville.

It means Miami have only topped the league table once in Messi's three full seasons in MLS, but they'll look to make up for this by defending their MLS Cup title. They'll need a big turnaround from their league form to do so, and they'll need Messi – but don't bet against him.

MVP in waiting ...Lionel Messi produced another excellent season

Star signing... Antoine Griezmann has impressed since joining Orlando City in July

3 BIG-NAME EXPERIENCE STILL PROVING USEFUL

MLS is often criticised for its penchant for snapping up older star names from Europe, with the disparaging "retirement league" label still thrown in its direction, but the arrival of players such as Robert Lewandowski, Antoine Griezmann, Timo Werner, Thomas Muller and Son Heung-min can still be a positive aspect of the league's dynamic and add to its wider appeal.

Were it not for Messi's consistent brilliance, French attacker Griezmann would have enjoyed much more of the spotlight. He's been one of the more successful signings of this type since moving to Orlando City in the summer, and has contributed to a goal in pretty much every game he's played.

Like any signing, there are good and bad fits depending on the needs of a team, and bringing in a big name for the sake of it isn't guaranteed to be a success. But some MLS teams are still making this work, and the approach remains a good one for the league for the right player in the right place at the right team.

4 VANCOUVER TOP THE WEST AMID UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Fresh from hosting World Cup matches at their BC Place stadium, Vancouver Whitecaps continued a successful season atop the Western Conference table that masked their off-field problems.

On the pitch, despite the occasional post-World Cup blip, the Whitecaps did enough to stay ahead of surprise challenges from FC Dallas and San Jose Earthquakes, as the big favourites in the West, Los Angeles FC, failed to live up to expectations.

Brian White and Thomas Muller were regular contributors for the team that also remained the best of MLS's three Canadian clubs and the only one of them to qualify for the play-offs.

In the background, the Whitecaps face ongoing ownership uncertainty as the franchise remains up for sale and, this being a league of franchises not clubs, faces the threat of relocation as long as it is.

This season showed that one of the most storied names in North American soccer has shown it deserves all the help it can get to remain active and stay in Vancouver.

5 ST LOUIS HERITAGE IN THE US OPEN CUP

St Louis' reputation as one of America's most notable soccer cities was boosted this year as St Louis City lifted the US Open Cup.

Teams like St Louis Simpkins-Ford and St Louis Central Breweries were among several that brought the cup back to Missouri in the 1900s, and the city is second only to New York for total Open Cup wins throughout the tournament's 113-year history.

Despite its rich soccer history, which includes providing five players for the USA XI that famously upset England at the 1950 World Cup, the city of St Louis has only been represented in MLS since 2023 when City joined.

As far as the Open Cup goes, it was another year of only partial involvement in the tournament for MLS teams, with only 16 entering, leaving out top sides such as Inter Miami and defending champions Nashville. This is set to change from 2027, when MLS returns to full involvement for the first time since 2023 and St Louis will have the chance to defend their crown.

US Open Cup winners ...St Louis City

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Big guns miss out on CAF Champions League

Egyptian giants Al Ahly – record 12-time champions of Africa – and last year's winners Mamelodi Sundowns will both be absent from this season's competition

Missing out... Egypt's Al Ahly have taken part in 28 of the past 30 editions of the Champions League

The shock early elimination of holders Mamelodi Sundowns and the failure of Egyptian giants Al Ahly to qualify for this season's African Champions League ensure an open field for the group phase.

Despite the absence of the two sides who have won three of the last four tournaments, there are several former continental champions in the race.

Five-time winners Zamalek head the field in terms of past achievement and were drawn in Group B alongside 1991 winners Club Africain of Tunisia and 1976 champions Mouloudia Alger, as well as Tanzania's Young Africans, who fired their head coach Manqoba Mngqithi just days after securing their ticket to the group stage. The reason for his surprise sacking? Drawing an away game in the domestic championship and thus falling behind arch-rivals Simba in the Tanzanian Premier League standings.

Simba are in Group C with competition debutants Colombe Sportive of Cameroon, Renaissance Berkane from Morocco and South Africa's Orlando Pirates, who were continental champions in 1995, two years before the introduction of the Champions League format.

RS Berkane got to the semi-finals last year and have emerged as a new force in the continental game over the

past decade, no doubt because of their former president Fouzi Lekjaa, a powerful force in the wheelhouse of both Moroccan and African football.

They are now managed by Bubista, who took Cape Verde through a fairy-tale World Cup campaign during the summer, but already finds himself under pressure after the domestic season started with three draws.

Orlando Pirates are coached by former Morocco and Fulham centre-back Abdeslam Ouaddou, who has a powerful squad at his disposal. After ending Sundowns' long dominant run in the South African league last season, they are strong candidates to replace their compatriots as continental champions too.

The group stage marks a record-breaking 24th Champions League group campaign for Esperance, who won the last of their four titles in 2019. They are top seeds in Group A where they have been handed what looks a relatively easy path to the quarter-finals in late February, drawn with Angolan clubs Petro Atletico and Wiliete plus Nouadhibou from Mauritania.

Five-time Champions League winners...Zamalek saw off AS Port of Djibouti in the first qualifying round

Despite the absence of the two sides who have won three of the last four tournaments, there are several former continental champions in the race

Not that Wiliete will accept their role as underdogs meekly. They were the shock conquerors of Sundowns on the away goals rule in October's second qualifying round, forcing a 1-1 draw in the return leg in Pretoria after a horror defensive error from the defending champions.

Hailing from the coastal city of Benguela, the second-biggest in Angola, they are competing in the Champions League for the first time after finishing runners-up to Petro Atletico in last season's GiraBola.

Under pressure... RS Berkane head coach Bubista

Petro will compete in the group phase for the seventh time in the last eight editions after a comeback win over Scottland of Zimbabwe in the second round. They had lost the first leg 2-0 in Harare, although it could have been worse given that their 40-year-old Angola international goalkeeper Hugo Marques was sent off in the opening minute.

After the shock away defeat, they fired their Portuguese head coach Joao Sousa and brought back old favourite Alexandre Santos, who immediately engineered a 3-0 home victory in the return leg. Santos was in charge of Morocco's Royal Armed Forces (AS FAR) when they lost to Sundowns in last season's final.

Group D is led by 2025 African champions Pyramids, who won their opening seven games of the new Egyptian league campaign. They are joined by Sudan's Al Hilal, Horoya of Guinea and Maghreb Fez, who are newcomers after a surprise triumph in the Moroccan championship last season – their first domestic league victory for 41 years.

Their title-winning Spanish head coach Pablo Franco has since moved to Tunisia to take over at Esperance and been replaced by the experienced Portuguese Rui Almeida.

Al Hilal remain in exile as Sudan's civil war wages on. They are now based in Rwanda and will play their home matches in Kigali.

In the Confederation Cup, Egypt's Al Ahly are the headline act although there was much conjecture over whether they would participate. Failure to qualify for the Champions League after participating in 28 of the past 30 editions was a harsh blow to the Cairo giants and some officials felt dropping down to the Confederation Cup was beneath them.

But they did enter and are through to the group phase, where they were drawn in Group A alongside Raja Casablanca of Morocco, Togolese outfit ASKO Kara and Angola's army club Primeiro de Agosto.

Holders USM Alger are in Group D, which also features Tunisia's CS Sfaxien, while AS FAR, last season's Champions League runners-up, headline Group B.

THE DRAW

GROUP A
- Esperance
- Petro Atletico
- Nouadhibou
- Wiliete

GROUP B
- Zamalek
- Young Africans
- MC Alger
- Club Africain

GROUP C
- RS Berkane
- Simba
- Orlando Pirates
- Colombe Sportive

GROUP D
- Pyramids
- Al Hilal
- Horoya
- Maghreb Fez

Curacao

STEVE MENARY

Curacao kicking on from the World Cup

The Caribbean island's domestic football scene has a lot of catching up to do

Something to build on...Curacao players celebrate after scoring their first-ever World Cup goal

The mini football centre and the giant white and blue neon football are still there in Willemstad and the shops still stock plenty of Curacao football shirts, which did a roaring trade internationally after the Dutch Caribbean island's debut World Cup appearance last summer.

The impact of Curacao's appearance in the United States, where Dick Advocaat's side scored their first World Cup goal (against Germany) and won their first-ever point (against Ecuador) has been transformative for football's place on the island.

"One hundred per cent, baseball was the number one sport. Since the World Cup it has definitely changed," says Dean Gorre, technical director at the Curacao Football Federation (FFK).

The Blue Wave – as Advocaat's team are nicknamed – came in for some criticism for sending a squad exclusively from the island's diaspora. Only Tahith Chong was born on the island – and even then, the former Manchester United midfielder was raised in the Netherlands.

Part of the reason for the focus on overseas stars was because local players were not even playing football.

Local club Jong Holland, from Willemstad, won a second successive Prome Divishon title in 2023 but then had to wait two years to defend their crown. The 2023-24 season was abandoned, and the following campaign was not even staged due to a complex local transfer dispute. In the intervening period, the onus was exclusively on overseas players.

Competitive football returned in 2025 with a new competition, the Kopa Korsou. Local icon Cuco Martina, who has played in England (for Everton, Stoke City and Southampton) and for the likes of NAC Breda, Feyenoord and Twente in the Netherlands, returned to play for Willemstad's Victory Boys.

The local league, comprised of 27 clubs in three tiers, is up and running and big games can attract crowds of more than 1,000. There is a big focus on local schools and eight club sides now have a women's section.

But the gap between the top of the domestic men's game and the national side has become too big since the hiatus.

"The local players have no chance to play for the national team as the gap is too big. They're all amateur," adds Gorre. "In the junior squad, they are local boys and the same with the women, but the best players still come from Europe."

Bridging that gap may take time but clubs from Curacao have shown their worth in regional competitions, in which sides from the island had been regular competitors.

Jong Colombia reached two finals of the CONCACAF Champions Cup in the island's heyday in the 1960s and '70s. More recently, Curacao's teams took part in the Caribbean Football Union's Club Shield and Jong Holland have twice been semi-finalists in recent years. After staging the competition in 2024, Curacao could not even provide an entrant for the following event.

In the 2026 edition, Inter Willemstad represented Curacao and despatched Grenada's St Johns in the last 16 only to lose on penalties to eventual finalists Delfines del Este from the Dominican Republic in the quarter-finals. That performance showed that the island's players can still compete on a regional level. Moving the local game up a gear is the next challenge.

> "One hundred per cent, baseball was the number one sport. Since the World Cup it has definitely changed"
> Dean Gorre, Curacao Football Federation

In demand... Curacao football shirts for sale in Willemstad
Credit: Steve Menary

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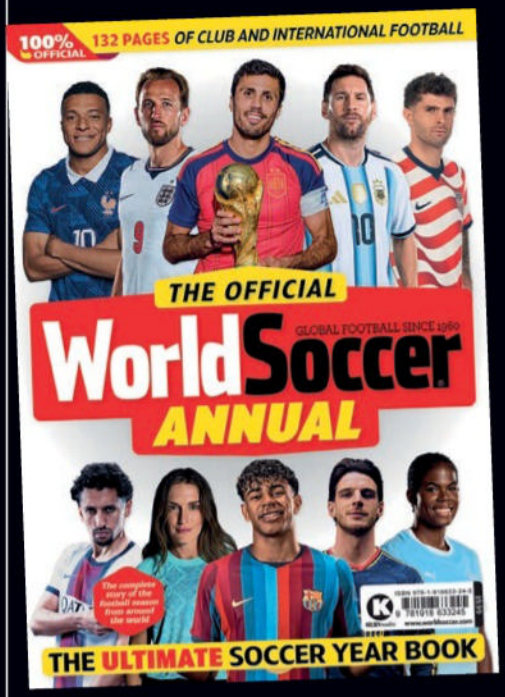

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The World Soccer Annual 2027 looks back over an extraordinary year of football from across the globe, featuring the standout teams, players and matches from both the international and club game – including the 2026 World Cup, the UEFA Champions League and domestic champions from all the biggest leagues on the planet. Plus, we reveal our pics of the year, goals we'd like to see again, and list the final league tables.

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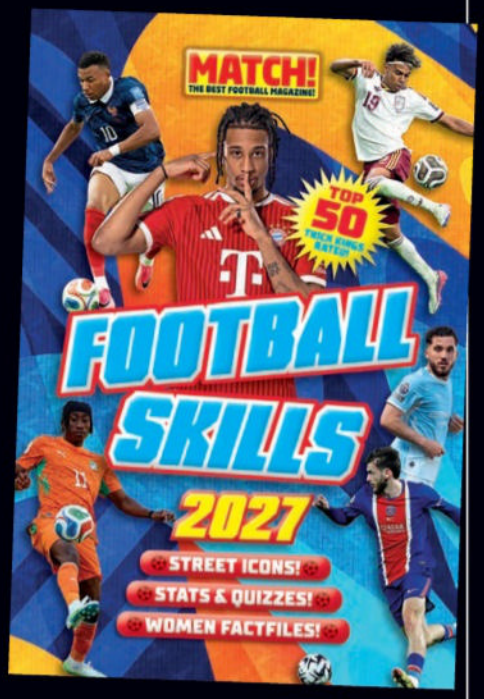

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Football Skills 2027 counts down the game's most skilful players, profiling and rating the world's top 50 tricksters. There's loads more to enjoy too, with fact files on both the women's game's best skillers and retro street icons, mind-boggling quizzes and the chance to pick your very own favourite trick machines for the chance to win a cool gaming headset.

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Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

"Finnish Leicester" ...Mariehamn players celebrate after winning the Veikkausliiga in 2016 *Credit: Alamy*

THE "FINNISH LEICESTER" SUCCUMB TO RELEGATION

Leicester City's fairy-tale Premier League triumph in 2016 completely overshadowed another remarkable footballing achievement that occurred 1,000 miles away.

IFK Mariehamn from the Aland Islands – an archipelago in the Baltic Sea that is an autonomous region of Finland but predominantly Swedish-speaking – were not even fully professional when they played in the Finnish Veikkausliiga for the first time in 2005. Operating on a shoestring budget and travelling by ferry – nine hours to Helsinki, six hours to Turku – to every away game on the mainland, their very survival in the division was a miracle.

But the islanders not only survived, they thrived. They lifted the Finnish Cup, their first major trophy, in 2015 under veteran coach Pekka Lyyski, who then stepped down and was replaced by the coaching duo of Peter Lundberg and Kari Virtanen. That managerial appointment had football pundits and fans alike earmarking the club for relegation the following year, but instead they finished top, sealing the 2016 title on the final day.

A decade on from their historic title win – during which they have pulled off many Houdini-esque escapes – Mariehamn have finally succumbed to relegation. But although their 22-year stay in the top flight is over, the "Finnish Leicester" will always have 2016.

JOURNEYMAN BRINGS FIFA'S CAREER MODE TO LIFE

Brazilian winger Sergio Barboza Jr. has quietly added his name to one of the most exclusive lists in football: players who have plied their trade in all six confederations. The 33-year-old achieved the feat by turning out for AS Tohie'a of Tahiti in October, thereby ticking off the only continent missing from his resumé, Oceania.

With the blessing of his pregnant wife back home in Brazil, Barboza made the three-day journey to the tiny French overseas territory in the Pacific Ocean to accomplish his mission at the beginning of October. He arrived on the island without a team and faced a race against time to get himself registered before the local transfer window closed, eventually finding a club who were prepared to cover his accommodation costs – and rewarding their faith in him by notching two goals and an assist.

With no actual salary, Barboza has come up with a creative way to fund his trip: a WhatsApp group that costs $6 a month and gives his subscribers a say in all sporting decisions, from the club he plays for to the number on his shirt. He also runs a YouTube channel called "*Jogador Duble*" (Stuntman Player), where he makes daily videos documenting his travels and providing insights into the realities of life as a footballer.

His next stop? Africa, the only continent where he does not yet have a goal and an assist to his name, with a spell in Angola in 2025 cut short by a bad leg break.

URUGUAY TRIALS ELECTRONIC CARD SYSTEM

When referee Eduardo Varela yellow-carded midfielder Juan Pablo Plada of Club Atletico Rentistas in the 12th minute of the Uruguayan Cup last-16 tie against Nacional, it was no ordinary booking. The caution – and the later dismissal of opposition player Nahuel Gelos – were the first electronic yellow and red cards handed out in professional football history.

According to Mauro Sacco, the director of tech company REFe and the architect of the pilot project, the aim is to bring technology to the only thing in football that is still analogue. He and his colleague Diego de la Pena came up with the idea while watching a match in rainy conditions and noting the difficulty the match official had jotting the bookings down by hand before the information was transferred to digital systems.

He then went about creating a phone-sized digital device that could do the job instead and help take the pressure off referees, while simultaneously transmitting all the match information automatically and electronically to the media.

Despite the media coverage ahead of the game, some supporters mistakenly believed Varela had lost his cards and chose to whip his phone out instead. Others reportedly could not see the colour of the cards he was issuing. REFe are thought to be exploring ways that they can make the card colours stand out more, with additional LED lighting one of the options on the table.

The Sweeper

COMING UP...

Omonia 29 Maiou v Omonia Nicosia
Cypriot First Division, December 7
Named after the date of their 2018 establishment and founded by a group of Omonia Nicosia ultras who broke away following the club's privatisation, Omonia 29 Maiou are back in the Cypriot top flight for a second time and targeting a first league win over their namesakes.

RB Omiya Ardija v Vegalta Sendai
J2 League, December 12
Having risen from the third tier in 2024, after being taken over by energy drinks giant Red Bull, Japan's Omiya Ardija are now chasing top-flight promotion, with a crunch top-of-the-table clash against Vegalta Sendai to come.

Monaco v Lincoln Red Imps
UEFA Conference League, December 17
This clash pits Monaco, a fully independent country but not in UEFA, against a team from Gibraltar, a British Overseas Territory that is part of Europe's governing body.

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Internationals

2026-27 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

League A

Group A1

Oct 2 – Liege
Belgium 3 (De Bruyne 10, 60, Lukaku 76)
Turkey 0
Belgium: Lammens – Castagne, Ngoy, Mechele, De Cuyper; Vanaken (Lavia 61), Tielemans, De Bruyne (Openda 82); Lukebakio (Lukaku 61), De Ketelaere (Fofana 82), Godts (Trossard 75).
Turkey: Cakir – Celik, Demiral, Bardakci, Kadioglu; Aydin (Fakili 66), Elmaz (Ozcan 73), Yuksek (Tiknaz 85), Akturkoglu (Gul 67); Guler, Yilmaz (Akgun 46).

Oct 2 – Saint-Denis
France 1 (Olise 55)
Italy 1 (Bastoni 68)
France: Maignan – Kalulu, Jacquet, Upamecano, Truffert; Cherki (Camavinga 76), Da Cunha (Lacroix 87), Rabiot; Olise, Dembele, Doue (Barcola 76).
Sent off: Upamecano 85.
Italy: Donnarumma – Kayode, Scalvini, Bastoni, Calafiori; Frattesi (Doumbia 80), Tonali (Barella 62), Fagioli (Scamacca 90); S. Esposito (Maldini 80), P. Esposito (Vergara 62), Kean.

Oct 5 – Saint-Denis
France 4 (Doue 77, Cherki 81, Olise 88, 90+1)
Belgium 1 (Lukebakio 35)
France: Restes – Kounde, Yoro, Lacroix, Diouf; Akliouche (Cherki 60), Camavinga (Rabiot 88), Kone (Da Cunha 61); Dembele (Olise 60), Lepaul, Barcola (Doue 72).
Belgium: Vandevoordt – Castagne, Ngoy, Mechele, Seys; Raskin, Lavia (Keita 87), Vanaken (Trossard 87); Lukebakio (Godts 70), Lukaku (De Ketelaere 70), Moreira (Openda 87).

Oct 5 – Bologna
Italy 3 (Scamacca 26, Calafiori 64, P. Esposito 87)
Turkey 1 (Simsir 61)
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo (Kayode 55), Mancini, Bastoni, Ruggeri (Calafiori 56); Barella (Tonali 70), Romano, Doumbia; Vergara (Frattesi 84), Scamacca (P. Esposito 56), Maldini.
Turkey: Cakir – Celik, Kabak, Bardakci; Kadioglu (Aydin 88), Ozcan, Yuksek (Akturkoglu 79), Elmali; Kahveci (Elmaz 70), Simsir (Fakili 70); Akgun (Gul 88).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
France	4	3	1	0	7	2	10
Italy	4	2	1	1	8	5	7
Belgium	4	2	0	2	6	5	6
Turkey	4	0	0	4	2	11	0

Group A2

Oct 1 – Munich
Germany 2 (Bischof 39, Wirtz 61)
Serbia 0
Germany: Urbig – Treu, Thiaw, Anton, Mittelstadt; Gnabry (El Mala 46), Pavlovic (Janelt 88), Bischof (Baur 77), Scherhant (Conte 77); Woltemade (Burkardt 77), Wirtz.
Serbia: Petrovic – Nedeljkovic, Erakovic (Pavlovic 67), N. Gudelj, Babic, Kostic; Zivkovic (Samardzic 66), Maksimovic (Kostov 88), Dzodic (Cvetkovic 67), Tadic (Lukic 67); Jovic.

Oct 1 – Thessaloniki
Greece 2 (Ioannidis 23, Masouras 45+2)
Netherlands 2 (Van Dijk 59, Reijnders 89)
Greece: Tzolakis – Saliakas, Mavropanos, Retsos, Tsimikas; Karetsas (Michailidis 83), Kourbelis, Androutsos (Douvikas 83), Tzolis (Masouras 18); Pavlidis (Zafeiris 71), Ioannidis (Tetteh 71).
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Dumfries, J. Timber (Zechiel 78), Van Dijk, Van de Ven; Veerman, Q. Timber (Gravenberch 46); Summerville, Til (Reijnders 46), Van Bommel (Lang 46); Meerdink (Zirkzee 70).

Oct 4 – Thessaloniki
Greece 0
Germany 0
Greece: Tzolakis – Saliakas, Mavropanos (Retsos 78), Koulierakis, Tsimikas; Masouras, Kourbelis (Mouzakitis 68), Zafeiris, Kyziridis (Androutsos 46); Pavlidis (Karetsas 46), Ioannidis (Kostoulas 88).
Germany: Urbig – Treu, Thiaw, Anton, Raum; Karl (El Mala 63), Bischof (Baur 83), Pavlovic, Scherhant (Conte 83); Wirtz, Burkardt (Woltemade 63).

Oct 4 – Eindhoven
Netherlands 2 (Koopmeiners 31, Zirkzee 71)
Serbia 1 (Cvetkovic 35)
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Dumfries, Van Dijk, Koopmeiners, Van de Ven; Gravenberch (Zechiel 59), Veerman (Hato 58), Reijnders (Q. Timber 82); Summerville, Meerdink (Zirkzee 46), Lang (Van Bommel 58).
Serbia: V. Milinkovic-Savic – Nedeljkovic, S. Gudelj (N. Gudelj 79), Babic, Pavlovic, Terzic (Kostic 72); Samardzic (Zivkovic 72), Lukic, A. Stankovic (Maksimovic 66); Cvetkovic, Tadic (Jovic 66).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Netherlands	4	2	2	0	7	5	8
Greece	4	2	2	0	5	3	8
Germany	4	1	2	1	3	2	5
Serbia	4	0	0	4	3	8	0

Group A3

Oct 3 – Rijeka
Croatia 0
England 7 (Kane 8, 53, Bellingham 21, Gordon 39, Saka 45, 68, Rogers 87)
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic (Sutalo 76), Vuskovic, Gvardiol, Perisic; Modric (Jakic 57), Kovacic; Ivanovic, P. Sucic (Mario Pasalic 46), Baturina (Vlasic 46); Musa (Matanovic 46).
England: Pickford – Quansah, Konsa, Guehi, Hall (Lewis-Skelly 79); Anderson (Gibbs-White 79), Scott (Garner 70); Saka, Bellingham, Gordon (Eze 70); Kane (Rogers 70).

Oct 3 – Oviedo
Spain 3 (Yamal 6, Rodri 35, Merino 89)
Czech Republic 1 (Slama 69)
Spain: Raya – Fresneda, Le Normand, Laporte, Garcia; Olmo (Fermin 67), Rodri (Zubimendi 77), Pedri (Merino 67); Yamal (Munoz 46), Fernandez, Baena (Yeremy 46).
Czech Republic: Kinsky – Sacek, Chaloupek, Krejci, Slama; Kral (Sadilek 73), Macek (Cerv 57); Radosta (Bucha 73), Ambros (Naderi 57), Lingr; Hlozek (Vitik 87).
Sent off: Krejci 85.

Oct 6 – Split
Croatia 1 (Perisic 17)
Spain 2 (Merino 61, 88)
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic, Sutalo, Vuskovic, Gvardiol; Vlasic (Baturina 77), Modric (P. Sucic 66), Jakic, Kovacic (Mario Pasalic 88), Perisic; Matanovic (Beljo 65).
Sent off: Perisic 79.
Spain: Simon – Pubill, Cubarsi, Laporte, Cucurella; Olmo (Fermin 71), Rodri (Zubimendi 71), Pedri (Yeremy 87); Yamal (Munoz 78), Oyarzabal, Baena (Merino 46).

Oct 6 – Wembley
England 3 (Coufal 27 og, Kane 40, 57)
Czech Republic 0
England: Pickford – Alexander-Arnold, Quansah, Guehi (Branthwaite 63), Hall (Gibbs-White 72); Anderson (Garner 63), Lewis-Skelly; Rogers, Bellingham (Ngumoha 73), Eze; Kane (Calvert-Lewin 82).
Czech Republic: Hornicek – Coufal (Kricfalusi 84), Vitik, Hranac, Slama (Zmrzly 68); Kral, Sadilek (Macek 68); Ambros (Hlozek 58), Sulc, Lingr (Radosta 46); Naderi.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Spain	4	4	0	0	12	5	12
England	4	3	0	1	14	3	9
Croatia	4	1	0	3	4	14	3
Czech Rep	4	0	0	4	2	10	0

Group A4

Oct 1 – Copenhagen
Denmark 2 (Damsgaard 23, Hojlund 53)
Portugal 4 (Cancelo 13, Ramos 25, Vitinha 67, Felix 87)
Denmark: Hermansen – Kristensen, Andersen, Provstgaard, Maehle (Nartey 80); Hjulmand, Hojbjerg; Daghim (Isaksen 46), Damsgaard (Hogh 85), Daramy; Hojlund (Froholdt 74).
Portugal: D. Costa – Cancelo (Dalot 63), Dias, Veiga, Mendes; R. Neves, Vitinha; Neto (Felix 81), Fernandes (Araujo 90+2), Leao (Trincao 63); Ramos (J. Neves 81).

Oct 1 – Cardiff
Wales 2 (D. James 38, Williams 48)
Norway 1 (Bobb 11)
Wales: Ward – Williams, Cabango, Davies, Dasilva; Ampadu, J. James (Sheehan 75); D. James (Johnson 76), Cullen (Colwill 76), Thomas; Koumas (Harris 85).
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson (Pedersen 16), Ajer, Heggem, Moller-Wolfe (Strand Larsen 75); Odegaard, Berge, Aursnes (Aasgaard 46); Bobb (Ostigard 49), Haaland, Schjelderup (Nusa 75).
Sent off: Heggem 45.

Oct 4 – Porto
Portugal 2 (Cancelo 38, Ramos 79)
Norway 1 (Ajer 36)
Portugal: D. Costa – Cancelo (Dalot 63), Dias, Veiga, Mendes; Palhinha (R. Neves 63); Conceicao, Vitinha (B. Silva 86), Fernandes (Trincao 90+2); Ramos, Felix (Tavares 90+2).
Sent off: Conceicao 86.
Norway: Selvik – Aursnes, Ajer, Ostigard, Moller-Wolfe; Odegaard, Berge, Berg (Aasgaard 87); Schjelderup, Haaland (Strand Larsen 67), Nusa (Bobb 74).

Oct 4 – Cardiff
Wales 0
Denmark 1 (Hojlund 75 pen)
Wales: Ward – Williams, Cabango, Davies (Moore 83), Dasilva; Ampadu, J. James (Sheehan 56); Johnson (Burns 76), Cullen (Colwill 76), Thomas; Koumas (Harris 56).
Denmark: Hermansen – Kristensen (Gaaei 76), Andersen, Provstgaard, Maehle; Isaksen (Kvistgaarden 82), Hjulmand, Hojbjerg (Skov Olsen 10), Daramy; Hojlund (Hogh 82), Froholdt.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Portugal	4	4	0	0	9	4	12
Denmark	4	2	0	2	7	7	6
Wales	4	1	0	3	2	5	3
Norway	4	1	0	3	6	8	3

League B

Group B1

Oct 3 – Skopje
North Macedonia 0
Scotland 2 (Bowie 7, McGinn 70 pen)
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Mladenovski, Musliu, Meliqi; Ilievski (Doriev 62), Gashtarov (Maleski 79), Stankovski (Atanasov 31), Herrera (Dzhekov 31); Bardhi (Elezi 62), Elmas; Miovski.
Scotland: Gunn – Welsh, McKenna, Binks; Gannon-Doak (Hickey 76), Ferguson, Gilmour (Graham 88), Robertson; McGinn, McBurnie (Christie 46); Bowie (Ure 75).
Sent off: McKenna 83.

Oct 3 – Luzern
Switzerland 2 (Janza 10 og, Ndoye 38)
Slovenia 1 (Vipotnik 1)
Switzerland: Kobel – Athekame (Bajrami 87), Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez (Britschgi 67); Freuler, Jashari; Aebischer (Sow 67), Manzambi, Ndoye (Rieder 87); Amdouni (Boteli 77).
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik, Drkusic (Brekalo 46), Bijol, Zec, Janza; Matko (Begic 64), Zabukovnik, Lovric (Gnezda Cerin 64), Sturm (Horvat 89); Vipotnik (Celar 78).

Oct 6 – Glasgow
Scotland 1 (Christie 31)
Slovenia 2 (Matko 56, Sturm 71)
Scotland: Gunn – Welsh (Hickey 66), Hendry, Binks; Gannon-Doak (Curtis 73), Ferguson, Gilmour, Robertson; McGinn (Ure 87), Christie (McPake 72); McBurnie (Bowie 66).
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik, Brekalo, Bijol, Zec, Janza; Matko (Kuzmic 89), Zabukovnik, Gnezda Cerin, Sturm; Vipotnik (Celar 79).

Oct 6 – Luzern
Switzerland 3 (Rieder 43, Manzambi 73, Ndoye 81)
North Macedonia 0
Switzerland: Kobel – Britschgi (Athekame 70), Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez; Freuler, Sierro (Jashari 46); Sow (Manzambi 46), Rieder, Ndoye (Sanches 86); Amdouni (Boteli 70).
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Stojchevski, Zajkov, Musliu, Alioski; Elezi (Kostadinov 70), Elmas; Mitrovski (Miovski 82), Bardhi (Stankovski 82), Doriev (Gashtarov 59); Rastoder (Omeragikj 59).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Switzerland	4	4	0	0	11	1	12
Slovenia	4	2	1	1	5	3	7
Scotland	4	1	1	2	3	5	4
N. Macedonia	4	0	0	4	0	10	0

Group B2

Oct 2 – Budapest
Hungary 1 (Kerkez 35)
Georgia 0
Hungary: B. Toth – Osvath, Orban, Csinger, Kerkez; Schafer, Szoboszlai (Szucs 80); Lukacs (Jurek 80), A. Toth (Vitalis 57), Z. Nagy (R. Toth 69); M. Toth (Barany 57).
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Goglichidze, Dvali, Lochoshvili; Kakabadze, Yegoian (Kochorashvili 46), Kiteishvili (Mekvabishvili 50), Tsitaishvili (Kvernadze 63); Chakvetadze (Davitashvili 76); Mikautadze (Zivzivadze 63), Kvaratskhelia.

Oct 2 – Trnava
Ukraine 0
Northern Ireland 3 (Brown 9, 61, Price 22)
Ukraine: Riznyk – Bondar (Sikan 63), Zabarnyi, Sarapii, Matviyenko; Ocheretko, Brazhko (Nazaryna 56); Tsyhankov, Yarmolenko (Zubkov 63), Sudakov (Nazarenko 68); Yaremchuk (Ponomarenko 63).
Northern Ireland: P. Charles – Spencer, Atcheson (McNair 84), McConville, Brown, Devlin (O'Neill 84); Morrison (Kelly 77), Hume, S. Charles, Price (Devenny 67); Donley (Magennis 77).

Oct 5 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 0
Georgia 0
Northern Ireland: P. Charles – Atcheson (McNair 86), McConville, Brown; Hume, S. Charles, Galbraith (Spencer, 65), Devenny; Kelly (Morrison 74), Price (Marshall 86); Donley (Magennis 74).
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze, Sazonov, Dvali, Lochoshvili; Kochorashvili (Tsitaishvili 46), Mekvabishvili (Lominadze 65); Mamageishvili (Yegoian 74), Davitashvili (Chakvetadze 65), Kvaratskhelia; Zivzivadze (Mikautadze 86).

Oct 5 – Trnava
Ukraine 1 (Yaremchuk 83)
Hungary 2 (M. Toth 52, Csinger 85)
Ukraine: Trubin – Krupskyi, Zabarnyi, Sarapii, Mykhavko; Ocheretko (Pikhalionok 70), Nazaryna (Varfolomeev 86); Tsyhankov, Ponomarenko (Yaremchuk 60), Veleten (Khlan 60); Krasnopir (Vanat 60).

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Hungary: B. Toth – Osvath, Orban, Csinger, Z. Nagy; Schafer (R. Toth 82), Szoboszlai (Csongvai 87); Lukacs (Szucs 61), Vitalis, A. Toth (Jurek 61); M. Toth (Szalai 72).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
N. Ireland	4	2	2	0	4	0	8
Hungary	4	2	1	1	3	2	7
Ukraine	4	1	1	2	2	5	4
Georgia	4	0	2	2	0	2	2

Group B3

Oct 1 – Debrecen
Israel 0
Kosovo 0
Israel: Tzur – Nachimas, Schlomo, Stoinov; Khalaili (Dasa 77), E. Peretz, Azoulay (Gloukh 73), Abada (Feingold 69); Dor Peretz (Kanichowsky 78), Solomon; Baribo (Turgeman 69).
Kosovo: Saipi – Vojvoda, I. Krasniqi, Dellova; E. Krasniqi, Matoshi (Zhegrova 77), Kacuri (Avdullahu 59), Avdyli (Gallapeni 59); Asllani, Jashari (Hodza 59); A. Rrahmani (Rashica 69).

Oct 1 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 2 (Parrott 12, 45 pen)
Austria 2 (Prass 71, Gregoritsch 77)
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – O'Shea, Egan, Scales (Kitching 63); Abankwah (O'Brien 75), Azaz, Coventry, Manning; Moylan (Cannon 86), Idah (Molumby 63); Parrott (Ogbene 75).
Austria: Wiegele – Posch, Affengruber (Wober 46), Lienhart, Mwene; Seiwald (Laimer 46), X. Schlager; Wimmer, Chukwuemeka (Gregoritsch 46), Schmid (Prass 67); Kalajdzic.

Oct 4 – Pristina
Kosovo 1 (Asllani 70)
Austria 1 (Lang 85)
Kosovo: Saipi – Dellova, I. Krasniqi, Raci; Vojvoda, Avdullahu, Hodza (Demaku 81), Gallapeni; Zhegrova (E. Krasniqi 81), Muriqi (Asllani 67), Zabergja (Rashica 67, Korenica 88).
Austria: A. Schlager – Posch, Bacher, Danso, Laimer; Seiwald (Wober 77), X. Schlager; Wimmer (Grull 62), Schmid (Kalajdzic 62), Prass (Lang 62); Gregoritsch

Oct 4 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 1 (Parrott 39 pen)
Israel 1 (Dor Peretz 47)
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – Dunne, O'Brien, Scales; Knight, Coventry (Lawal 84), Molumby, Manning (Bagan 84); Moylan (Ogbene 69), Idah (Vata 69); Parrott.
Israel: Tzur – Abada (Solomon 72), Feingold (Dasa 78), Nachimas, Stoinov, Revivo; Dor Peretz (Shua 78), E. Peretz, Azoulay (Levi 58), Gloukh; Turgeman (Gandelman 58).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Austria	4	2	2	0	9	5	8
Kosovo	4	1	2	1	3	4	5
Rep of Ireland	4	1	2	1	6	4	5
Israel	4	0	2	2	2	7	2

Group B4

Oct 2 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Alajbegovic 80)
Sweden 1 (Gyokeres 61)
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Hamzic – Memic, Katic (Smajlovic 87), Muharemovic, Kolasinac; Bajraktarevic, Basic (Mahmic 76), Gigovic, Alajbegovic (Sunjic 87); Demirovic (Lukic 76), Dzeko (Tabakovic 63).
Sweden: Johansson – Skoglund, Starfelt (Smith 31), Lindelof, Gudmundsson; Bernhardsson (Swedberg 76), Larsson, Karlstrom, Nanasi (Sema 90+5); Zeneli (Bergvall 76), Gyokeres.

Oct 2 – Warsaw
Poland 6 (Lewandowski 24 pen, 47, 86, Ghita 49 og, Zielinski 62, Bednarek 66)
Romania 0
Poland: Bulka – Cash (Wojtuszek 63), Bednarek, Kiwior, Frankowski; Nowak (Urbanski 63), Zielinski (Slisz 71); Swiderski, Szymanski (Regula 71), Zalewski (Pietuszewski 78); Lewandowski.
Romania: Hindrich – Ratiu, Dragusin, Ghita, Bancu (Borza 67); R. Marin (Cirjan 78), Baluta, Mihaila (Coubis 27); Hagi (M. Marin 67); Man (Racovitan 67), Birligea.
Sent off: Dragusin 22.

Oct 5 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Basic 84 pen)
Poland 0
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Zlomislic – Smajlovic (Bajraktarevic 63), Katic, Muharemovic, Kolasinac; Memic, Gigovic (Radeljic 89), Basic, Mahmic (Tahirovic 63); Demirovic (Lukic 78), Tabakovic (Bazdar 78).
Poland: Bulka – Cash (Wojtuszek 63), Bednarek, Kiwior, Frankowski; Nowak (Urbanski 89); Swiderski (Regula 63), Szymanski, Zielinski, Zalewski; Zukowski (Pietuszewski 89).

Oct 5 – Bucharest
Romania 0
Sweden 1 (Gyokeres 13)
Romania: Hindrich – Ratiu, Coubis, Ilie, Bancu (Eissat 46); Dragomir, R. Marin (Mihaila 69); Man, Stanciu (Hagi 69), Olaru (Cicaldau 69); Tanase (Cirjan 83).
Sweden: Johansson – Beijmo, Smith, Lindelof, Gudmundsson (Svensson 54); Bergvall, Karlstrom (Larsson 54); Bernhardsson (Skoglund 89), Zeneli (Bolin 75), Nanasi (Dahl 77); Gyokeres.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sweden	4	3	1	0	7	3	10
Bosnia & Herz	4	2	2	0	6	3	8
Poland	4	1	1	2	7	4	4
Romania	4	0	0	4	3	13	0

League C

Group C1

Oct 3 – Helsinki
Finland 2 (Walta 26, 71)
Albania 1 (Manaj 4)
Finland: Hradecky – Stahl, T. Miettinen (Vaisanen 62), S. Miettinen, Lahteenmaki; Kairinen (Kamara 46), Markhiyev (Peltola 89), Walta (Valakari 82); Svanback, Pohjanpalo, Hakans (Jukkola 62).
Albania: Berisha – Djimsiti, Ismajli, Mitaj; Hysaj, Ramadani, Asllani (Shehu 77), Pilios (Mehmeti 77); Muci (Uzuni 65), Manaj (Daku 46), Hoxha (Sherri 25).
Sent off: Berisha 22.

Oct 3 – Budapest
Belarus 4 (Kontsevoy 46, 88, Shumansky 65, Ebong 68)
San Marino 0
Belarus: Pavlyuchenko – Begunov (Kalinin 55), Volkov, Gomanov, Pechenin; Ebong (Bocherov 69), Yablonskiy; Kontsevoy, Gromyko (Shumanskiy 55), Simanenka (Lisakovich 46); Melnichenko (Barkovskiy 74).
San Marino: Colombo – Benvenuti (Fabbri 75), Cevoli, Pasolini, Giocondi (Tosi 67); L. Capicchioni (Meloni 83); Golinucci (Mularoni 46), Lazzari (Pancotti 67), Zannoni; Nanni, Giacopetti.

Oct 6 – Tirana
Albania 2 (Asllani 11, 90+3 pen)
San Marino 1 (Lazzari 66)
Albania: Dajsinani – Djimsiti, Ismajli, Mitaj (Ramadani 71); Hysaj, Shehu (Daku 71), Asllani, Pilios; Muci (Mehmeti 46), Manaj, Hoxha (Uzuni 56).
San Marino: Colombo – Fabbri, Cevoli (Benvenuti 59), Rossi (Pasolini 64), Giocondi; Meloni (Lazzari 58), L. Capicchioni (Bugli 86), Zannoni; Della Balda; Salicioni (Pancotti 58), Giacopetti.

Oct 6 – Budapest
Belarus 1 (Shumansky 1)
Finland 0
Belarus: Lapoukhov – Kalinin, Volkov, Gomanov, Pechenin; Bocherov (Lisakovich 46), Selyava (Yablonskiy 84); Lukashov, Ebong, Shumanskiy (Kovalev 46); Barkovskiy (Melnichenko 62).
Finland: Hradecky – Lahteenmaki (Kallman 67), Tenho, S. Miettinen, Mahuta (Hakans 74); Peltola (Vaananen 67), Markhiyev, Walta; Svanback (Pohjanpalo 58), Keskinen, Valakari (Jukkola 58).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Albania	4	3	0	1	8	3	9
Belarus	4	2	1	1	5	2	7
Finland	4	2	1	1	9	2	7
San Marino	4	0	0	4	1	16	0

Group C2

Oct 2 – Nicosia
Cyprus 2 (Konomis 19, Kakoullis 31)
Armenia 0
Cyprus: Fabiano – Konomis, Kyprianou, Panagiotou, Pileas; Andreou, Kastanos (Artymatas 84); Loizou (Tzionis 68), Edwards (Neophytou 68), Kakoullis (Malekkides 54); Pittas (Georgiou 84).
Sent off: Pileas 52.
Armenia: Beglaryan – Piloyan, Simonyan (Iwu 63), Harutyunyan; Bandikyan (Terteryan 52), K. Hovhannisyan, Spertsyan, Tiknizyan; Sevikyan (Grigoryan 46), Manvelyan (N. Hovhannisyan 78); Miranyan (Nalbandyan 63).

Oct 2 – Riga
Latvia 1 (Strods 82)
Montenegro 2 (Adzic 3, 56)
Latvia: Matrevics – Savalnieks (Jurkovskis 28), Melniks, Cernomordijs (Daskevics 65), Vientiess, Cirkin; Patijcuks (Strods 78), Vapne, Zelenkovs (Cudars 78), Ciganiks; Uldrikis (Gutkovskis 65).
Montenegro: Popovic – Vesovic, Rubezic, Vujacic, Radunovic (Perovic 60); Jankovic (Djukanovic 61), Loncar, Adzic; Osmajic (Brnovic 61), Krstovic (Latkovic 68), Jovetic (Vukovic 78).

Oct 5 – Nicosia
Cyprus 2 (Kosti 70, Edwards 90+4)
Latvia 1 (Daskevics 57)
Cyprus: Fabiano – Konomis, Kyprianou, Panagiotou, Malekkides; Artymatas (Kyriakou 67), Kastanos (Tsaroulla 90+1); Edwards, Loizou (Kosti 58), Kakoullis (Georgiou 58); Pittas (Neophytou 67).
Latvia: Matrevics – Jurkovskis, Melniks, Vientiess, Balodis, Ciganiks; Daskevics (Aleksanjan 74), Vapne (Cudars 46), Zelenkovs (Saveljevs 88), Strods (Patijcuks 46); Gutkovskis (Uldrikis 60).

Oct 5 – Podgorica
Montenegro 0
Armenia 0
Montenegro: Popovic – Roganovic (Vesovic 62), Djuric, Savic, Gasevic; Jankovic (Loncar 62), Bulatovic (Simun 79), Adzic; Djukanovic (Jovetic 46), Krstovic, Osmajic (Vukanic 88).
Sent off: Loncar 86.
Armenia: Beglaryan – Piloyan, Simonyan (Petrosyan 73), Harutyunyan, Tiknizyan; Iwu, K. Hovhannisyan; Serobyan, Manvelyan (Spertsyan 56), N. Hovhannisyan (Gharibyan 88); Miranyan (Eloyan 74).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Montenegro	4	3	1	0	7	4	10
Cyprus	4	2	1	1	5	3	7
Armenia	4	1	1	2	4	5	4
Latvia	4	0	1	3	2	6	1

Group C3

Oct 2 – Astana
Kazakhstan 1 (Alip 64)
Moldova 2 (Clescenco 45+1, Popescu 50)
Kazakhstan: Zarutskiy – Mrynskiy (Zhagarov 66), Yerlanov (Maliy 74), Alip, Vorogovskiy; Orazov (Tapalov 46), Karaman; Astanov (Tuyakbaev 46), Islamkhan, Kenzhebek; Karimov (Shushenachev 59).
Moldova: Celeadnic – Revenco (David 86), Baboglo, Iovu, Gherasimencov, Reabciuk (Stefan 75); Fratea (Motpan 46), Rata (Dumbravanu 86), Perciun; Popescu, Clescenco (Stina 59).

Oct 2 – Torshavn
Faroe Islands 1 (Justinussen 66)
Slovakia 1 (Vatnhamar 38 og)
Faroe Islands: Lamhauge – Danielsen, Faero, Vatnhamar, Edmundsson, Agnarsson; Kallsberg (Samuelsen 55), Turi, Bjartalid (Nielsen 84), Sorensen; Knudsen (Justinussen 55).
Slovakia: Greif – Valjent (Hancko 82), Vavro, Skriniar, Mesik; Suslov, Lobotka, Rigo (Duda 63); Duris (Schranz 63), Bozenik (Strelec 70), Sauer (Haraslin 46).

Oct 6 – Astana
Kazakhstan 2 (Maliy 68, Alip 76)
Faroe Islands 2 (Knudsen 22, Turi 63)
Kazakhstan: Anarbekov – Kasym, Maliy, Alip; Zhagarov (Amir 73), Kuat, Zhukov (Bekbolat 73), Basmanov (Vorogovskiy 46); Samorodov, Islamkhan (Astanov 87); Karimov (Shushenachev 46).
Sent off: Maliy 85.
Faroe Islands: Lamhauge – Faero, Vatnhamar, Vatnsdal (Chukwudi 53); Danielsen, Turi, Bjartalid, Agnarsson; Samuelsen (Kallsberg 82), Knudsen (Davidsen 69), Sorensen (Hellisdal 82).
Sent off: Agnarsson 65.

Oct 6 – Chisinau
Moldova 0
Slovakia 4 (Strelec 8, Suslov 44, Hancko 60, Haraslin 75)
Moldova: Celeadnic – Revenco (Motpan 76), Baboglo (Stefan 66), Iovu, Gherasimencov (Dros 58), Reabciuk; Fratea, Rata (Dumbravanu 58), Perciun; Popescu, Clescenco (Stina 65).
Slovakia: Greif – Mesik, Skriniar, Obert (Satka 82), Hancko; Lobotka, Duda (Rigo 67); Schranz (Sauer 67), Suslov (Pokorny 82), Haraslin; Strelec (Prekop 81).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slovakia	4	3	1	0	9	2	10
Faroe Islands	4	0	4	0	5	5	4
Moldova	4	1	1	2	3	8	4
Kazakhstan	4	0	2	2	5	7	2

Group C4

Oct 3 – Tallinn
Estonia 1 (Peetson 5)
Luxembourg 0
Estonia: Igonen – Paskotsi, Kuusk, Mets; Peetson, Palumets (Soomets 72), Poom, Kait (Ainsalu 80), Schjonning-Larsen; Kristal; Mannilaan (Mustmaa 66).
Luxembourg: Moris – Bohnert (Olesen 83), Mahmutovic (Dzogovic 83), Selimovic, Carlson; Cruz; Natami, V. Thill (Rupil 73), Dos Santos (S. Thill 62), Dardari (Kadamani 62); Videira.

Oct 3 – Reykjavik
Iceland 3 (Oskarsson 37, 60, Ellertsson 90)
Bulgaria 0
Iceland: Valdimarsson – Anderson, Gunnarsson (Gretarsson 46), Magnusson, Ellertsson; A. Sigurdsson (A. Gudjohnsen 46), Baldursson (Palsson 62), Johannesson, Thorsteinsson (G. Sigurdsson 62); Haraldsson (Tomasson 82); Oskarsson.
Bulgaria: Naumov – Turitsov, K. Dimitrov, Velkov, Velkovski; L. Petkov (M. Petkov 55), Kraev, Gruev (Tsenov 55), Rusev (Z. Dimitrov 67); Chandarov (Panayotov 67), Iliev (Nikolov 83).

Oct 6 – Tallinn
Estonia 0
Iceland 0
Estonia: Igonen – Paskotsi, Kuusk, Tougjas; Peetson, Kristal (Skvortsov 68), Poom, Palumets (Kait 61), Saliste (Schjonning-Larsen 61); Mannilaan (Mustmaa 61), Saarma.
Iceland: Valdimarsson – Palsson, Thordarson, Magnusson (Tomasson 67), Gretarsson; G. Sigurdsson (Willumsson 67), Johannesson; Haraldsson, A. Gudjohnsen, Anderson; Oskarsson.

Oct 6 – Luxembourg
Luxembourg 0
Bulgaria 2 (Balov 19, Iliev 34)
Luxembourg: Moris (Pereira Cardoso 46) – Bohnert, Selimovic, Carlson, Veiga (S. Thill 78); Cruz (Rupil 67); Natami, V. Thill, Dos Santos (Olesen 46), Kadamani; Videira (Dardari 46).
Bulgaria: Naumov – Y. Stoyanov, Velkov, Tsenov, H. Petrov; Kraev, Gruev; Minchev (K. Dimitrov 83), Rusev (Panayotov 50), Balov (S. Ivanov 66); Iliev (Nikolov 66).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iceland	4	2	2	0	7	1	8
Estonia	4	1	3	0	2	1	6
Bulgaria	4	1	1	2	3	5	4
Luxembourg	4	1	0	3	2	7	3

League D

Group D1

Oct 1 – Ta' Qali
Malta 1 (J. Mbong 53)
Gibraltar 1 (Scanlon 61)
Malta: Bonello – Corbalan (Zammit 88), Shaw (Muscat 88), Pepe, Camenzuli; Satariano (Paiber 73), Guillaumier; J. Mbong (P. Mbong 73), Teuma (Ewurum 82), Chouaref; Cardona.
Gibraltar: Hankins – Jolley, Bent, Lopes, Valarino; Torrilla; Richards, Ronan, Pozo (Stevens 86), Scanlon; De Barr.

Oct 4 – Ta' Qali
Malta 1 (Teuma 49)
Andorra 0
Malta: Bonello – Corbalan (Muscat 72), Shaw, Pepe (Mentz 46), Camenzuli; Paiber, Satariano; J. Mbong (Lonardelli 72), Teuma (P. Mbong 56), Chouaref (Zammit 85); Cardona.
Andorra: Alvarez – Borra, Llovera, Olivera, San Nicolas (Garcia 84); Martinez (Alaez 70), Remolins, Babot, Rodrigo; Berto, Lopez.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Malta	3	2	1	0	4	2	7
Gibraltar	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Andorra	3	0	1	2	1	3	1

Group D2

Oct 1 – Baku
Azerbaijan 0
Liechtenstein 0
Azerbaijan: Balayev – Mutallimov (Abbasov 46), Badalov, Krivotsyuk, Bayramov; Xaybulayev, Mahmudov (A. Huseynov 59); Emreli, Sadykhov (Isayev 46), Isgandarli (Adilkhanov 75); Qurbanli (Abdullazade 59).
Liechtenstein: B. Buchel – N. Hasler, Weissenhofer, Traber, Hofer, Goppel; Sele (Netzer 77), M. Buchel (Schlegel 90+2), A. Hasler (Zund 77); Kindle (Luque-Notaro 46), A. Lo Russo (Allgauer 60).

Oct 4 – Baku
Azerbaijan 1 (Khaybulayev 25)
Lithuania 0
Azerbaijan: Balayev – R. Mammadov, B. Huseynov, Dasdamirov; Mutallimov (Badalov 88), Xaybulayev (Dadashov 64), Isayev (C. Nuriyev 80), Abbasov; Bayramov (Isgandarli 46), Emreli, O. Mammadov (Safarov 64).
Lithuania: Svedkauskas – Armalas, Utkus (Kazukolovas 46), Lekiatas (Venckus 83); Lickunas (Burba 67), Vorobjovas (Michelbrink 46), Gineitis, Lasickas; Slivka (Jankauskas 67), Kucys, Dolznikov.
Sent off: Kucys 90+7.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Azerbaijan	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Lithuania	3	1	1	1	3	2	4
Liechtenstein	2	0	1	1	0	2	1

• *All group standings are before November's ties. November's UEFA Nations League results and line-ups will feature in January's issue*

2026-27 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

League A

Group A

Oct 1 – Willemstad
Curacao 1 (J. Bacuna 58)
Trinidad & Tobago 0

Oct 1 – Santo Domingo
Dominican Republic 1 (Romero 55)
Haiti 4 (Deedson 9, Isidor 51, 67, Fortune 76)

Oct 1 – Managua
Nicaragua 0
Costa Rica 3 (Sinclair 57, Mora 60, Michel 90+7)

Oct 4 – Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (Phillip 39)
Curacao 1 (Paulina 61)

Oct 4 – San Jose
Costa Rica 2 (Mora 6, Soto 21)
Haiti 0

Oct 4 – Managua
Nicaragua 1 (Moreno 53)
Dominican Republic 2 (Morschel 58 pen, Breton 66)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Curacao*	4	3	1	0	12	5	10
Haiti*	4	3	0	1	9	5	9
Dominican Rep**	4	3	0	1	8	8	9
Costa Rica**	4	2	0	2	8	6	6
Trinidad & T*** (R)	4	0	1	3	4	7	1
Nicaragua*** (R)	4	0	0	4	4	14	0

**Advance to League A quarter-finals*
***Qualify for CONCACAF Gold Cup prelims*
****Relegated and enter play-ins*

Group B

Oct 2 – Paramaribo
Suriname 0
Guatemala 0

Oct 2 – Fort-de-France
Martinique 2 (Varane 40, Mexique 88)
Honduras 1 (Puerto 8)

Oct 2 – San Salvador
El Salvador 0
Jamaica 2 (East 39, 64)

Oct 5 – Fort-de-France
Martinique 1 (Antiste 56)
El Salvador 1 (Valladares 3)

Oct 5 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 1 (Evans 90+6)
Suriname 0

Oct 5 – Tegucigalpa
Honduras 1 (Palma 51)
Jamaica 1 (Campbell 27)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guatemala*	4	2	1	1	9	3	7
Jamaica*	4	2	1	1	6	4	7
Suriname**	4	2	1	1	5	4	7
Honduras**	4	1	1	2	5	6	4
Martinique*** (R)	4	1	1	2	5	7	4
El Salvador*** (R)	4	1	1	2	4	10	4

**Advance to League A quarter-finals*
***Qualify for CONCACAF Gold Cup prelims*
****Relegated and enter play-ins*

League B

Group A

Oct 1 – Mayaguez
Dominica 1 (Jules 75)
Guyana 5 (De Rosario 27, Glasgow 41, Moore 50, Benjamin 79, George 90)

Oct 1 – Mayaguez
Cayman Islands 0
Puerto Rico 3 (R. Rivera 26, W. Rivera 45, Antonetti 90+3 pen)

Oct 4 – Mayaguez
Guyana 8 (Glasgow 5, 33, Moore 18, 57, Bonds 24, 75, Kellman 53, George 69)
Dominica 1 (Cuffy 67)

Oct 4 – Mayaguez
Puerto Rico 1 (De Leon 64)
Cayman Islands 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guyana	4	4	0	0	16	2	12
Puerto Rico	4	3	0	1	6	1	9
Cayman Islands	4	0	1	3	0	6	1
Dominica	4	0	1	3	2	15	1

Group B

Oct 2 – Wildey
Saint Lucia 3 (Elva 18 pen, Jude-Boyd 35, Phillip 57)
Guadeloupe 0

Oct 2 – Wildey
Barbados 4 (Gale 26, 41, Applewhaite 29, Reid-Stephen 86)
Bermuda 1 (Parfitt-Williams 8)

Oct 5 – Wildey
Guadeloupe 0
Saint Lucia 1 (Caull 5)

Oct 5 – Wildey
Bermuda 1 (Parfitt-Williams 75)
Barbados 2 (Gale 79, 82)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Barbados	4	3	1	0	10	4	10
Saint Lucia	4	3	0	1	9	4	9
Guadeloupe	4	1	1	2	4	7	4
Bermuda	4	0	0	4	5	13	0

Group C

Oct 2 – Port of Spain
St Kitts & Nevis 3 (Kelly 26, Simpson 82, Williams 88)
Cuba 3 (Perez 29, 51, Catasus 38)

Oct 2 – Port of Spain
Bonaire 2 (Cicilia 7, Bostdorp 33)
Grenada 3 (Hippolyte 50 pen, Ettienne 55, Redhead 69)

Oct 5 – Port of Spain
Cuba 2 (Perez 25, Diaz 90)
St Kitts & Nevis 2 (Williams 16, 63 pen)

Oct 5 –Port of Spain
Grenada 1 (Ettienne 11)
Bonaire 4 (Martijn 13, Sonnenschein 59, Bostdorp 67, Cicilia 83)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cuba	4	2	2	0	10	5	8
St Kitts & Nevis	4	2	2	0	10	6	8
Bonaire	4	1	0	3	7	8	3
Grenada	4	1	0	3	4	12	3

Group D

Oct 3 – Belmopan
Sint Maarten 2 (De Nooijer 74, Christina 82)
St Vincent & Grenadines 4 (Anderson 11, 24, 57, Hughes 34 og)

Oct 3 – Belmopan
Belize 0
French Guiana 2 (Anakaba 78, Haabo 84)

Oct 6 – Belmopan
St Vincent & Grenadines 4 (Anderson 21, Spring 40, Solomon 44, Stewart 73)
Sint Maarten 0

Oct 6 – Belmopan
French Guiana 1 (Nozile 84)
Belize 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
St Vincent & Gren	4	4	0	0	11	3	12
French Guiana	4	3	0	1	5	2	9
Belize	4	1	0	3	1	4	3
Sint Maarten	4	0	0	4	2	10	0

League C

Group A

Oct 1 – Providenciales
British Virgin Islands 0
Montserrat 2 (Barzey 11, Mars 43 og)

Oct 4 – Providenciales
Turks & Caicos 3 (Hutchinson 37, Robertson 90+2, Clare 90+6 pen)
British Virgin Islands 0

Oct 6 – Providenciales
Montserrat 4 (Taylor 3 pen, 45+4 pen, Baker 82, Boatswain 90)
Turks & Caicos 1 (Forbes 71)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Montserrat* (P)	4	4	0	0	11	1	12
Turks & Caicos	4	2	0	2	7	6	6
BVI	4	0	0	4	0	11	0

**Advance to League C semi-finals & enter play-ins*

Group B

Oct 1 – St George
Anguilla 0
Antigua & Barbuda 3 (Bishop 35, 64, Tomlinson 74)

Oct 4 – St George
Aruba 3 (Fermina 7, Mercera 90+3, Peterson 90+4)
Anguilla 2 (Owen 39, Fleming 77)

Oct 6 – St George
Antigua & Barbuda 3 (Tomlinson 5, Bramble 11, Satchell 86)
Aruba 2 (Bennett 14, Fermina 50)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Antigua & B* (P)	4	3	0	1	11	3	9
Aruba* (P)	4	3	0	1	8	5	9
Anguilla	4	0	0	4	2	13	0

**Advance to League C semi-finals & enter play-ins*

Group C

Oct 1 – Upper Bethlehem
US Virgin Islands 0
Saint Martin 5 (Raga 44, Denis 49, Arne 83, 86, 89)

Oct 4 – Upper Bethlehem
Bahamas 2 (Bayles 58, Julmis 90+2 pen)
US Virgin Islands 3 (Henry 30, 52, Chemaly 35 og)

Oct 6 – Upper Bethlehem
Saint Martin 6 (Raga 15, 77, 90+1, Arne 24, Makhabe 38, Alexandre 50 pen)
Bahamas 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saint Martin* (P)	4	3	0	1	19	2	9
USVI	4	3	0	1	8	8	9
Bahamas	4	0	0	4	3	20	0

**Advance to League C semi-finals & enter play-ins*

• *Group standings in League B are before November's ties. November's UEFA Nations League results, including the quarter-finals and play-ins, will feature in January's issue*

FRIENDLIES

Oct 1 – Cordoba
Argentina 4 (La. Martinez 19, Paz 29, Romero 54, Lopez 86)
Bolivia 0

Oct 1 – Tashkent
Uzbekistan 4 (Esanov 27, Mozgovoy 45, Norchaev 48, 90)
Syria 1 (Khakimov 90+2 og)

Oct 1 – Bishkek
Maldives 0
Lebanon 6 (Chakroun 3, 36, 42, Rasheed 52 og, Kassas 83, 90+2)

Oct 2 – Ulsan
South Korea 0
Venezuela 0

Oct 2 – Chongqing
China 0
Palestine 5 (Al Hamlawi 16, 22, Dabbagh 45+5, 54, Al Qaq 90+3)

Oct 2 –Johannesburg
DR Congo 0
Uganda 2 (Bogere 7, Boateng 49)

Oct 2 – St Pierre
Mauritius 3 (De Robillard 28 pen, W. Francois 33, A. Francois 59)
Sri Lanka 0

Oct 3 – Harrison
Colombia 0
Paraguay 1 (Benitez 56)

Oct 3 – Kolkata
India 0
Brazil 4 (Estevao 28, Pedro 42, Lino 58, 90+5)

Oct 3 – Yekaterinburg
Russia 6 (Sadulaev 37, Prutsev 54, Tyukavin 65, Glushenkov 84, Petrov 87 pen, Ndisiro 90+2 og)
Namibia 0

Oct 3 – Montreal
Canada 2 (Shaffelburg 19, 35)
Peru 0

Oct 3 – Abidjan
Ivory Coast 0
Cameroon 1 (Nsongo 46)

Oct 3 – Suva
Fiji 1 (Dunn 10)
Vanuatu 0

Oct 4 – Buenos Aires
Argentina 7 (La. Martinez 4, Diallo 8 og, Prestianni 12, Paz 35, Alvarez 36, Mastantuono 57, Simeone 90+3)
Burkina Faso 0

Oct 4 – Glendale
United States 3 (Hall 28, Sullivan 62, Tillman 84)
Mexico 0

Oct 4 – Marseille
Comoros 0
Senegal 1 (I. Ndiaye 5)

Oct 4 – Cairo
Egypt 0
South Africa 1 (Dithejane 51)

Oct 4 – Tangier
Morocco 1 (Ezzalzouli 35 pen)
Mali 1 (Diarra 77)

Oct 4 – Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan 3 (Abdurakhmanov 19, Shukurov 31, Khamis 64 og)
Lebanon 1 (Budib 62)

Oct 5 – Kigali
Rwanda 0
Kenya 0

Oct 5 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
Gibraltar 2 (Lopes 20, Borge 57)

Oct 5 – Johannesburg
Uganda 1 (Bogere 90+1)
DR Congo 1 (Mbuku 64)

Oct 5 – St Pierre
Mauritius 2 (De Robillard 6, Aurelien 80)
Sri Lanka 3 (Suresh 20, Senthurvasan 40, Durrant 69 pen)

Oct 6 – Yongin
South Korea 2 (Son Heung-min 6, Oh Se-hun 60)
Uzbekistan 0

Oct 6 – Chongqing
China 0
Tajikistan 1 (Hanonov 53)

Oct 6 – Kolkata
India 1 (Thapa 22)
Uruguay 6 (Nunez 11 pen, M. Araujo 28, 59, Zalazar 53, Sanabria 71, Aguirre 86)

Oct 6 – Nizhny Novgorod
Russia 3 (Sadulaev 30, Kislyak 45+2, Miranchuk 54)
Nigeria 3 (Iheanacho 10, Edokpolor 78, Adams 90+4)

Oct 6 – Tizi Ouzou
Algeria 2 (Belloumi 53, Bensebaini 72 pen)
Niger 1 (N'Dri 12)

Oct 6 – Jeddah
Jordan 0
Venezuela 0

Oct 7 – Buenos Aires
Argentina 3 (Otamendi 48, Paz 61, Messi 71 pen)
Benin 0

Oct 7 – Miami
Colombia 2 (Velasquez 57, Arcila 90+2)
Peru 0

Oct 7 – Minnesota
United States 1 (Ellis 29)
Canada 0

Oct 7 – Los Angeles
Mexico 0
Chile 2 (Gutierrez 54, Pizarro 65)

Club football

EUROPE

2026-27 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matchday 2

Oct 13 – Lens
Lens (Fra) 0
Sporting (Por) 2 (Suarez 22, Doumbia 74)

Oct 13 – Baku
Sabah (Aze) 2 (Parris 49, Mickels 88)
Slavia Prague (Cze) 0

Oct 13 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 3 (Timber 64, Eze 67, Saka 71)
Lille (Fra) 0

Oct 13 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (Barrios 1, Lookman 79)
Manchester United (Eng) 0

Oct 13 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 3 (L. Martinez 44, 81, Bonny 90+3)
Club Brugge (Bel) 4 (Tresoldi 30 pen, 63, 74, Vermant 87)

Oct 13 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 1 (Batrakov 28)
Barcelona (Spa) 4 (Cancelo 43, Fermin 50, Gordon 53, Adeyemi 65)

Oct 13 – Leipzig
RB Leipzig (Ger) 1 (Gruda 75)
PSV (Ned) 0

Oct 13 – Stavanger
Viking (Nor) 3 (Stensness 2, Christiansen 38, H. Haugen 90)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 3 (Kane 54 pen, 60, Diaz 71)

Oct 13 – Villarreal
Villarreal (Spa) 3 (Mikautadze 23, Mourino 26, Oluwaseyi 86)
Napoli (Ita) 1 (Rrahmani 8)

Oct 14 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 3 (Zechiel 20, Hadj Moussa 52, Sanchez 81 og)
Como (Ita) 2 (Diao 18, Douvikas 90+3)

Oct 14 – Linz
LASK (Aut) 3 (Ljubicic 63, Flecker 74, 77)
Liverpool (Eng) 6 (Araujo 22, Barcola 24, 37, 66, Frimpong 51, Koumas 72)

Oct 14 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 3 (De Roon 20, Malen 51, 57)
Real Madrid (Spa) 4 (Mbappe 25, Espi 82, Endrick 85, Rudiger 90)

Oct 14 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 6 (Manzambi 12, Jackson 31, 39, Barkley 68 pen, 72, Abraham 90)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 0

Oct 14 – London
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 3 (Pedrinho 34 pen, Vinicius Tobias 80, Mendoza 86)
AEK Athens (Gre) 1 (Majer 28)

Oct 14 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 1 (Sjovold 52)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 0

Oct 14 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 2 (Haaland 53, 75)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 4 (Doue 13, Dembele 15, Vitinha 32, Akliouche 63)

Oct 14 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 3 (Ezzalzouli 47, Hernandez 74, Isco 84 pen)
Porto (Por) 2 (Veiga 54, Aghehowa 61)

Oct 14 – Bratislava
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 0
Stuttgart (Ger) 3 (Undav 29, Cruz 65 og, Demirovic 90)

Matchday 3

Oct 20 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 2 (Aydin 4, Greenwood 11)
Slavia Prague (Cze) 2 (Provod 15, Kacor 90)

Oct 20 – Baku
Sabah (Aze) 1 (McCarthy 39)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 2 (Guirassy 10, 53)

Oct 20 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 4 (Hermoso 21, Molina 39, Pisilli 52, Malen 58 pen)
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 0

Oct 20 – Porto
Porto (Por) 0
PSV (Ned) 1 (Til 57)

Oct 20 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 4 (Mac Allister 36, 65, Araujo 45+2, Wirtz 69)
Villarreal (Spa) 3 (Mikautadze 4, Cardona 29, Oluwaseyi 87)

Oct 20 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 5 (Anderson 12, Foden 34, 65, 76, Cherki 57)
AEK Athens (Gre) 1 (Pilios 52)

Oct 20 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 4 (Doue 38, Hernandez 72, Vitinha 81, Fabian 86)
Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Espart 55 Yamal 79)

Oct 20 – Naples
Napoli (Ita) 4 (Politano 1, McTominay 41, 75, Bjortuft 88 og)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 3 (Hauge 27, Helmersen 62, Fet 90+4)

Oct 20 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 1 (Leweling 36)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Alvarez 47)

Oct 21 – Como
Como (Ita) 4 (Paz 2, 57, Douvikas 49, Ramon 76)
Manchester United (Eng) 1 (Zirkzee 90+1)

Oct 21 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 2 (Diaoune 7, 39)
Galatasaray (Tur) 4 (Akgun 2, Batrakov 44, Bentaleb 52 og, Osimhen 61)

Oct 21 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 3 (Barkley 23, Buendia 37 pen, Heggheim 62 og)
Viking (Nor) 1 (Christiansen 84)

Oct 21 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 3 (Vanaken 45+3, Seys 50, Forbs 72)
Lens (Fra) 0

Oct 21 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Davies 35, Kane 61 pen)
Arsenal (Eng) 2 (Eze 25, Rice 82)

Oct 21 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Carlos Augusto 77)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 0

Oct 21 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 4 (B. Silva 44, Guler 52, Mbappe 83, Diomande 87)
RB Leipzig (Ger) 1 (Gomis 85)

Oct 21 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 1 (Isco 59 pen)
Feyenoord (Ned) 0

Oct 21 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 2 (Suarez 5 pen, 89)
LASK (Aut) 3 (Lang 15, Kalajdzic 63, Danek 68)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PSG	3	3	0	0	14	5	9
Aston Villa	3	3	0	0	12	3	9
Liverpool	3	3	0	0	12	7	9
Real Madrid	3	3	0	0	10	5	9
Real Betis	3	3	0	0	7	4	9
Stuttgart	3	2	1	0	7	2	7
Arsenal	3	2	1	0	6	2	7
Barcelona	3	2	0	1	11	6	6
Como	3	2	0	1	10	5	6
Man City	3	2	0	1	9	5	6
Club Brugge	3	2	0	1	9	6	6
Sporting	3	2	0	1	7	4	6
B. Dortmund	3	2	0	1	5	4	6
Bayern Munich	3	1	2	0	10	5	5
Roma	3	1	1	1	8	5	4
Atletico Madrid	3	1	1	1	4	3	4
Shakhtar Donetsk	3	1	1	1	4	3	4
PSV	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Villarreal	3	1	0	2	8	8	3
Inter	3	1	0	2	5	6	3
Man United	3	1	0	2	5	6	3
Napoli	3	1	0	2	5	7	3
Galatasaray	3	1	0	2	6	9	3
LASK	3	1	0	2	6	9	3
Sabah	3	1	0	2	3	6	3
Feyenoord	3	1	0	2	4	8	3
Lens	3	1	0	2	3	7	3
Bodo/Glimt	3	1	0	2	4	9	3
AEK Athens	3	1	0	2	3	8	3
RB Leipzig	3	1	0	2	3	8	3
Fenerbahce	3	0	2	1	3	9	2
Slavia Prague	3	0	1	2	4	7	1
Viking	3	0	1	2	5	9	1
Porto	3	0	0	3	2	6	0
Lille	3	0	0	3	4	10	0
Slovan Bratislava	3	0	0	3	1	13	0

• *League standings are before November's ties. November's results will feature in January's issue*

2026-27 EUROPA LEAGUE

Matchday 2

Oct 15 – Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 1 (Alcocer 56)
Lillestrom (Nor) 1 (Olsen 90+2)

Oct 15 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 2 (Koopmeiners 49, Meerdink 77 pen)
Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 1 (Forson 56)

Oct 15 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0
Milan (Ita) 4 (Cisse 15, 32, 49, Ramos 72)

Oct 15 – Poznan
Lech Poznan (Pol) 0
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 4 (Schick 29 pen, 41 pen, Tillman 32, Maza 89)

Oct 15 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 0
Omonia (Cyp) 3 (Montnor 17, Tankovic 59, Coulibaly 85)

Oct 15 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 3 (Tolisso 8, Nuamah 45+2, Sulc 76)
Crystal Palace (Eng) 2 (Yeremy 50, Kamada 81)

Oct 15 – Leuven
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 1 (Keita 88)
Real Sociedad (Spa) 1 (Turrientes 46)

Oct 15 – Leiria
Torreense (Por) 1 (Feltes 37)
Sunderland (Eng) 2 (Ahoka 67, Sadiki 90+3)

Oct 15 – Bournemouth
Bournemouth (Eng) 3 (Evanilson 43, Rayan 76, Rodriguez 90+2 pen)
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0

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World Service

Oct 15 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 2 (Zachariassen 49, 81 pen)
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Visinsky 90)

Oct 15 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 1 (Beljo 90+6 pen)
Anderlecht (Bel) 0

Oct 15 – Bialystok
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 3 (Jozwiak 13, Conceicao 38, Sow 51)
Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 1 (Banjaqui 11)

Oct 15 – Nijmegen
NEC (Ned) 1 (Chery 64)
Levski Sofia (Bul) 1 (Reinaldo 35)

Oct 15 – Marseille
Marseille (Fra) 0
Olympiacos (Gre) 1 (Hezze 42)

Oct 15 – Vigo
Celta Vigo (Spa) 1 (Alvarez 18)
Juventus (Ita) 2 (Woltemade 58, Kolo Muani 90+2)

Oct 15 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 4 (J. Duran 5 pen, 36, Bah 23, Pavlidis 89)
Celtic (Sco) 1 (C. Duran 63)

Oct 15 – Rennes
Rennes (Fra) 2 (Nagida 76, Ait Boudlal 90)
OFI (Gre) 1 (Fountas 10)

Oct 15 – Sinsheim
Hoffenheim (Ger) 2 (Asllani 68, Machida 88)
Besiktas (Tur) 3 (Murillo 60, Oh Hyeon-gyu 72, 79)

Matchday 3

Oct 22 – Yerevan
Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 0
AZ (Ned) 4 (Byskov 21, Patati 27, 76, Meerdink 79)

Oct 22 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 4 (Yusuf 20, Gomez 58, Diadie 80 og, Lisztes 90)
Torreense (Por) 1 (Pozo 23)

Oct 22 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 2 (Beljo 33, 37)
NEC (Ned) 4 (Bischoff 25, Linssen 45, Chery 54, 80)

Oct 22 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 2 (Celik 5, Woltemade 67 pen)
Rennes (Fra) 2 (Al Tamari 15, Dia 43 pen)

Oct 22 – Poznan
Lech Poznan (Pol) 1 (Bengtsson 70)
Sunderland (Eng) 1 (Tutyerov 2)

Oct 22 – Heraklion
OFI (Gre) 0
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Hofmann 35, 38)

Oct 22 – Dusseldorf
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 4 (Florucz 45+1 pen, Guilherme Smith 61, 81, Aquino 77)
Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 0

Oct 22 – Graz
Sturm Graz (Aut) 1 (Diakite 13)
Marseille (Fra) 0

Oct 22 – Bournemouth
Bournemouth (Eng) 3 (Kluivert 8 pen, Tavernier 32 pen, Adli 84)
Milan (Ita) 0

Oct 22 – Istanbul
Besiktas (Tur) 2 (Ndidi 45+2, Olaitan 73)
Crystal Palace (Eng) 2 (Yeremy 51, Mateta 55)

Oct 22 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 1 (Baur 47)
Celta Vigo (Spa) 2 (Rodriguez 68, 71)

Oct 22 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Kabongo 62)
Levski Sofia (Bul) 2 (Everton Bala 44, Reinaldo 65)

Oct 22 – Bialystok
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 0
Anderlecht (Bel) 3 (Cvetkovic 22, Winkler 72, Onia Seke 80)

Oct 22 – Lillestrom
Lillestrom (Nor) 0
Real Sociedad (Spa) 6 (Gomez 25, 27, Sucic 33, 72, Oskarsson 64, Zakharyan 80)

Oct 22 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 2 (Kramer 50, Kucys 90)
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 2 (Kitano 9, Lindstrom 46)

Oct 22 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 1 (Gonzalez 78)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 0

Oct 22 – Nicosia
Omonia (Cyp) 1 (Kakoullis 42)
Benfica (Por) 4 (Nego 14 og, Pavlidis 49, Aursnes 76, Prestianni 85)

Oct 22 – Sinsheim
Hoffenheim (Ger) 3 (Kramaric 45+4, Daghim 49, Hlozek 83)
Lyon (Fra) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Benfica	3	3	0	0	10	2	9
B. Leverkusen	3	3	0	0	8	0	9
Bournemouth	3	3	0	0	8	1	9
Ferencvaros	3	3	0	0	9	3	9
Olympiacos	3	3	0	0	4	1	9
Union SG	3	2	1	0	8	1	7
Juventus	3	2	1	0	9	3	7
Besiktas	3	2	1	0	9	5	7
Sunderland	3	2	1	0	4	2	7
AZ	3	2	0	1	6	2	6
Omonia	3	2	0	1	5	4	6
Lyon	3	2	0	1	5	6	6
Rennes	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Real Sociedad	3	1	1	1	8	3	4
Crystal Palace	3	1	1	1	8	5	4
Sparta Prague	3	1	1	1	5	3	4
Levski Sofia	3	1	1	1	3	3	4
Dinamo Zagreb	3	1	1	1	3	4	4
Sturm Graz	3	1	1	1	1	3	4
NEC	3	1	1	1	5	8	4
RB Salzburg	3	1	1	1	3	6	4
Anderlecht	3	1	0	2	4	3	3
Hoffenheim	3	1	0	2	5	5	3
Milan	3	1	0	2	4	5	3
Celta Vigo	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
OFI	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
Jagiellonia	3	1	0	2	4	6	3
Torreense	3	1	0	2	4	7	3
Celje	3	0	1	2	2	7	1
H. Be'er Sheva	3	0	1	2	1	6	1
Lillestrom	3	0	1	2	2	9	1
Lech Poznan	3	0	1	2	1	9	1
Viktoria Plzen	3	0	0	3	2	7	0
Marseille	3	0	0	3	1	6	0
Celtic	3	0	0	3	3	9	0
Ararat-Armenia	3	0	0	3	2	11	0

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2026-27 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Matchday 1

Oct 15 – Lugano
Lugano (Sui) 3 (Ajeti 25, Moncada 84, Grgic 90 pen)
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 2 (Elsnik 32, Krunic 67)

Oct 15 – Split
Hajduk Split (Cro) 2 (Sanyang 37, Soticek 55)
Ajax (Ned) 1 (Klaassen 53)

Oct 15 – Gent
Gent (Bel) 1 (Goore 87)
AGF (Den) 0

Oct 15 – Elbasan
Egnatia (Alb) 1 (Gruda 26)
Midtjylland (Den) 1 (Cho Gue-sung 33)

Oct 15 – Tampere
KuPS (Fin) 2 (Pennanen 54, Engvall 90+6)
Trabzonspor (Tur) 4 (Onuachu 3, Salah 44, Franculino 47, 90+1)

Oct 15 – Helsingborg
Mjallby (Swe) 2 (Bergstrom 54, Noren 65)
Inter Club d'Escaldes (And) 0

Oct 15 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 2 (Dessers 10 pen, Kangwa 70)
Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 1 (Jojic 80)

Oct 15 – Sofia
CSKA Sofia (Bul) 1 (Zwarts 76)
Monaco (Fra) 2 (Brunner 3, Fati 44)

Oct 15 – Riga
Riga (Lva) 1 (Oulad M'Hand 12)
Kairat (Kaz) 1 (Gual 5 pen)

Oct 15 – Craiova
Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 1 (Al Hamlawi 59)
Getafe (Spa) 1 (Gudelj 81)

Oct 15 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 3 (Elmas 1, Raspadori 18 pen, Scamacca 44)
Pafos (Cyp) 1 (Biel 88)

Oct 15 – Brighton
Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng) 4 (Rutter 41, 54, Hinshelwood 45+2, O'Riley 67)
Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu) 0

Oct 15 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 3 (Elyounoussi 49, Cornelius 79, 86)
Braga (Por) 0

Oct 15 – Enschede
Twente (Ned) 1 (Zerrouki 65)
Thun (Sui) 0

Oct 15 – Edinburgh
Hearts (Sco) 1 (McEntee 33)
Nordsjaelland (Den) 1 (Rojkjaer 86)

Oct 15 – Sint-Truiden
Sint-Truiden (Bel) 2 (Vanwesemael 12, Sebaoui 88)
Iberia 1999 (Geo) 0

Oct 15 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 3 (Grifo 15, Pavlovic 53 og, Eggestein 65)
Jablonec (Cze) 2 (Rusek 28, Kuol 90+3)

Oct 15 – Bergen
Brann (Nor) 2 (Castro 64, 81)
Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 1 (Gomez 59)

Matchday 2

Oct 22 – Almaty
Kairat (Kaz) 1 (Bekbolat 79)
Panathinaikos (Gre) 5 (Taborda 6, Dessers 24 pen, 47, Kangwa 57, Rastoder 75)

Oct 22 – Tbilisi
Iberia 1999 (Geo) 1 (Jinjolava 55 pen)
Mjallby (Swe) 1 (Pettersson 89)

Oct 22 – Farum
Nordsjaelland (Den) 2 (Adel 55, 68)
CSKA Sofia (Bul) 2 (Godoy 8, 88)

Oct 22 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 2 (Elsnik 34, Kostov 41)
Copenhagen (Den) 2 (Gashtarov 29 og, Carrizo 70)

Oct 22 – Jablonec
Jablonec (Cze) 0
Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng) 0

Oct 22 – Kaunas
Kauno Zalgiris (Ltu) 1 (Oliveira 11)
Brann (Nor) 4 (Casteo 7 pen, Holm 25, 40, 85)

Oct 22 – Getafe
Getafe (Spa) 2 (Azon 2, Mayoral 74)
Lugano (Sui) 5 (Ajeti 3, 26, Cimignani 7, Bislimi 50, Behrens 90+2)

Oct 22 – Encamp
Inter Club d'Escaldes (And) 1 (Arellano 78)
Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 3 (Al Hamlawi 3, Baiaram 5, Elisor 86)

Oct 22 – Limassol
Pafos (Cyp) 1 (Biel 76)
Riga (Lva) 1 (Caio 67)

Oct 22 – Trabzon
Trabzonspor (Tur) 2 (Salah 32 pen, Franculino 58)
Hearts (Sco) 0

Oct 22 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 2 (Arokodare 87, Ouazane 90+3)
Atalanta (Ita) 0

Oct 22 – Randers
AGF (Den) 1 (Bogere 49)
Egnatia (Alb) 1 (Gruda 13)

Oct 22 – Monaco
Monaco (Fra) 3 (Brunner 45+2, Camara 83, Fati 90+2)
Freiburg (Ger) 0

Oct 22 – Herning
Midtjylland (Den) 0
Sint-Truiden (Bel) 1 (Soelle Soelle 42)

Oct 22 – Thun
Thun (Sui) 0
Hajduk Split (Cro) 1 (Dalisson 17)

Oct 22 – Banja Luka
Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 2 (Savic 29, Deket 50)
KuPS (Fin) 0

Oct 22 – Gibraltar
Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 1 (Nano 38)
Twente (Ned) 4 (Van den Belt 19, 57, Weghorst 24, Weidmann 90+3)

Oct 22 – Braga
Braga (Por) 2 (Gomez 3, Martinez 76)
Gent (Bel) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Panathinaikos	2	2	0	0	7	2	6
Lugano	2	2	0	0	8	4	6
Brann	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
Trabzonspor	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
Twente	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Monaco	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Sint-Truiden	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Hajduk Split	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Brighton	2	1	1	0	4	0	4
Copenhagen	2	1	1	0	5	2	4
Uni Craiova	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Mjallby	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Ajax	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Borac Banja Luka	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Atalanta	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Braga	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Gent	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Freiburg	2	1	0	1	3	5	3
Nordsjaelland	2	0	2	0	3	3	2
Egnatia	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Riga	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Red Star Belgrade	2	0	1	1	4	5	1
CSKA Sofia	2	0	1	1	3	4	1
Jablonec	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Midtjylland	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
AGF	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Pafos	2	0	1	1	2	4	1
Hearts	2	0	1	1	1	3	1
Iberia 1999	2	0	1	1	1	3	1
Getafe	2	0	1	1	3	6	1
Kairat	2	0	1	1	2	6	1
Thun	2	0	0	2	0	2	0
Lincoln Red Imps	2	0	0	2	2	6	0
KuPS	2	0	0	2	2	6	0
Inter Club d'Escaldes	2	0	0	2	1	5	0
Kauno Zalgiris	2	0	0	2	1	8	0

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2026 COPA LIBERTADORES

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Oct 14 – Rio de Janeiro
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Wesley Nata 90+3)
Palmeiras (Bra) 2 (Lopez 45, Marlon Freitas 85)

Oct 15 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 0
Flamengo (Bra) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Oct 21 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 0
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Hercules 82)
2-2 on aggregate; Palmeiras win 5-3 on pens

Oct 22 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 0
Estudiantes (Arg) 0
0-0 on aggregate; Estudiantes win 3-2 on pens

2026 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Oct 13 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 0
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 1 (Adson 25)

Oct 14 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 3 (Reinier 37, Bernard 42, Borbas 80)
Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Oct 20 – Rio de Janeiro
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 1 (Rodriguez 66)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 3 (Di Lollo 4, Merentiel 34, Paredes 88)
Boca Juniors win 3-2 on aggregate

Oct 21 – Montevido
Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 2 (Silva 89, Kagelmacher 90+3)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 0
Atletico Mineiro win 3-2 on aggregate

CONCACAF

2026 US OPEN CUP

Quarter-Finals

May 19-20:
Orlando City 4-1 Atlanta United;
St Louis City 2-2 Houston Dynamo
(AET, St Louis City win 4-2 on pens);
Columbus Crew 1-0 New York City FC;
Colorado Rapids 2-0 San Jose Earthquakes

Semi-Finals

Sep 16:
Columbus Crew 2-1 Orlando City;
Colorado Rapids 0-3 St Louis City

Final

Oct 21 – Columbus
Columbus Crew 0
St Louis City 0
After Extra-Time; St Louis City win 5-3 on pens

2026 CANADIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

Final

Oct 21 – Montreal
CF Montreal 1 (Rios 49)
Forge 1 (Batisse 45+6)
After Extra-Time; Forge win 4-2 on pens

2026 CONCACAF CARIBBEAN CUP

Semi-Finals

Oct 13-14:
Portmore United (Jam) 3-1 Violette (Hai);
Club Sando (Tri) 1-1 Mount Pleasant (Jam)

Oct 22-28:
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 2-0 Club Sando (Tri) (agg 3-1); Violette (Hai) 2-1 Portmore United (Jam) (agg 3-4)

2026 CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Semi-Finals

Oct 21-22:
Cartagines (Crc) 1-0 Olimpia (Hon);
Motagua (Hon) 0-0 Alajuelense (Crc)

Oct 28-29:
Olimpia (Hon) 2-2 Cartagines (Crc) (agg 2-3);
Alajuelense (Crc) 2-1 Motagua (Hon) (agg 2-1)

Play-Ins

Oct 20-21:
Marathon (Hon) 2-1 Alianza (Slv);
Firpo (Slv) 0-0 Saprissa (Crc)

Oct 27-28:
Alianza (Slv) 0-0 Marathon (Hon) (agg 1-2);
Saprissa (Crc) 2-1 Firpo (Slv) (agg 2-1)

ASIA

2026-27 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Matchday 2

Oct 12 – Tashkent
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 1 (Khamdamov 89 pen)
Al Qadsiah (KSA) 1 (Reijnders 35)

Oct 12 – Muscat
Tractor (Irn) 0
Al Shamal (Qat) 0

Oct 12 – Dubai
Al Wasl (UAE) 1 (Malheiro 45+3)
Al Ahli (KSA) 3 (Ibanez 20, Trincao 58, Al Buraikan 90+1)

Oct 12 – Basra
Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) 1 (Jawad 89)
Al Ain (UAE) 4 (Kaku 13, Al Rosan 18 og, H. Rahimi 23, 43)

Oct 12 – Al Rayyan
Al Gharafa (Qat) 1 (Sassi 48)
Esteghlal (Irn) 2 (Asani 37, Goudarzi 60)

Oct 12 – Riyadh
Al Nassr (KSA) 3 (Angelo 33, Ronaldo 42, Gofurov 78 og)
Neftchi (Uzb) 1 (Odilov 51)

Oct 13 – Al Rayyan
Al Sadd (Qat) 0
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Watkins 40, Neves 65 pen)

Oct 13 –Jeddah
Al Ittihad (KSA) 1 (Rios 66)
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 2 (Azmoun 7, 16)

Matchday 3

Oct 26 – Fergana
Neftchi (Uzb) 1 (Iskanderov 17 pen)
Al Ittihad (KSA) 2 (Aouar 34, En-Nesyri 90+1)

Oct 26 –Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 (Toney 4, Goncalves 86)
Al Gharafa (Qat) 1 (F. Coman 53)

Oct 26 – Al Ain
Al Ain (UAE) 2 (Rabia 21, H. Rahimi 70)
Tractor (Irn) 1 (Halilovic 55)

Oct 26 – Baghdad
Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) 1 (Abdul-Amir 70)
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 0

Oct 26 – Dammam
Al Qadsiah (KSA) 1 (Quinones 84)
Al Sadd (Qat) 1 (Afif 74)

Oct 27 – Dubai
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 2 (Mateusao 69, Alvina 84)
Esteghlal (Irn) 0

Oct 27 – Al Khor
Al Shamal (Qat) 3 (Said 8, Bounedjah 48, Ben Romdhane 54)
Al Hilal (KSA) 1 (S. Al Dawsari 32)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ain	3	3	0	0	10	2	9
Shabab Al Ahli	3	3	0	0	5	1	9
Al Ahli	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Esteghlal	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Al Hilal	3	2	0	1	5	4	6
Al Shamal	3	1	2	0	4	2	5
Al Qadsiah	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Al Ittihad	3	1	1	1	4	4	4
Al Nassr	2	1	0	1	3	5	3
Neftchi	3	1	0	2	3	5	3
Al Quwa Al Jawiya	3	1	0	2	2	5	3
Pakhtakor	3	0	2	1	2	3	2
Tractor	3	0	1	2	1	3	1
Al Sadd	3	0	1	2	1	6	1
Al Gharafa	3	0	0	3	3	6	0
Al Wasl	2	0	0	2	2	5	0

• *League standings are before November's ties. November's results will feature in January's issue*

East Region

Matchday 2

Oct 13 – Newcastle
Newcastle Jets (Aus) 1 (Vergos 32)
Gamba Osaka (Jpn) 3 (Toshida 40, Hummet 73, Welton 86)

Oct 13 – Kameoka
Kyoto Sanga (Jpn) 1 (Matsuda 88)
Ratchaburi (Tha) 0

Oct 13 – Pohang
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 0
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 2 (Guilherme 49, 89)

Oct 13 – Shanghai
Shanghai Port (Chn) 1 (Ampem 49)
Daejeon Hana Citizen (Kor) 1 (Diogo Oliveira 54)

Oct 13 – Buriram
Buriram United (Tha) 0
Beijing Guoan (Chn) 1 (Abreu 88)

Oct 13 – Hanoi
Cong An Hanoi (Vie) 0
Kashima Antlers (Jpn) 1 (Adou 61 og)

Oct 14 – Kobe
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 2 (Osako 11, Kuwasaki 68)
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 0

Oct 14 – Kashiwa
Kashiwa Reysol (Jpn) 5 (Kubo 3, Kakita 10, Harakawa 15 pen, Yuruki 26, Yamauchi 28)
Port (Tha) 1 (Bihr 64)

Matchday 3

Oct 27 – Shanghai
Shanghai Port (Chn) 2 (Ampem 44, Campos 60)
Cong An Hanoi (Vie) 3 (Perea 35, 69, Artur 49)

Oct 27 – Iskandar Puteri
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 3 (Silva 53, Bergson 62, Stoichkov 86)
Port (Tha) 0

Oct 27 – Daejeon
Daejeon Hana Citizen (Kor) 0
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 1 (Komatsu 83)

Oct 27 – Kameoka
Kyoto Sanga (Jpn) 5 (Tawiah 45+6, A. Souza 56, 84, Tulio 60, Elias 67)
Newcastle Jets (Aus) 2 (Wood 13 pen, 45+2 pen)

Oct 27 – Beijing
Beijing Guoan (Chn) 2 (Dudziak 34, Wang Gang 52)
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 2 (Mota 2, Lee Yeong-jae 64)

Oct 27 – Ratchaburi
Ratchaburi (Tha) 0
Kashiwa Reysol (Jpn) 0

Oct 28 – Kashima
Kashima Antlers (Jpn) 3 (Koike 69, Cavric 75, Bueno 87)
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 0

Oct 28 – Suita
Gamba Osaka (Jpn) 1 (Usami 66)
Buriram United (Tha) 1 (Mancha 39)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kashima Antlers	3	3	0	0	11	1	9
Vissel Kobe	3	3	0	0	5	1	9
Gamba Osaka	3	2	1	0	8	3	7
JDT	3	2	1	0	6	1	7
Beijing Guoan	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Kyoto Sanga	3	2	0	1	6	3	6
Kashiwa Reysol	3	1	1	1	6	3	4
Shanghai Port	3	1	1	1	9	8	4
Daejeon HC	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Jeonbuk H. Motors	3	1	1	1	4	5	4
Cong An Hanoi	3	1	0	2	4	7	3
Buriram United	3	0	2	1	2	3	2
Ratchaburi	3	0	1	2	4	7	1
Pohang Steelers	3	0	0	3	1	8	0
Port	3	0	0	3	2	10	0
Newcastle Jets	3	0	0	3	4	15	0

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2026-27 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

West Region

Group A

Oct 14:
Nasaf (Uzb) 1-2 Al Wahda (UAE);
Al Kuwait (Kuw) 3-1 Al Khaldiya (Bhr)
Oct 28:
Nasaf (Uzb) 0-1 Al Kuwait (Kuw);
Al Khaldiya (Bhr) 1-2 Al Wahda (UAE)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Wahda	3	3	0	0	7	4	9
Al Kuwait	3	2	0	1	6	4	6
Nasaf	3	0	1	2	1	3	1
Al Khaldiya	3	0	1	2	2	5	1

Group B

Oct 14:
Al Jazira (UAE) 2-1 Arkadag (Tkm);
Al Muharraq (Bhr) 2-0 Gol Gohar (Irn)
Oct 28:
Gol Gohar (Irn) 0-0 Arkadag (Tkm);
Al Jazira (UAE) 4-2 Al Muharraq (Bhr)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Jazira	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Arkadag	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Al Muharraq	3	1	0	2	4	5	3
Gol Gohar	3	0	2	1	0	2	2

Group C

Oct 14:
Al Taawoun (KSA) 2-1 Al Rayyan (Qat);
Al Faisaly (Jor) 2-0 Al Nahda (Oma)
Oct 28:
Al Nahda (Oma) 1-4 Al Rayyan (Qat);
Al Faisaly (Jor) 0-2 Al Taawoun (KSA)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Taawoun	3	2	1	0	5	2	7
Al Rayyan	3	2	0	1	9	6	6
Al Faisaly	3	1	0	2	5	6	3
Al Nahda	3	0	1	2	2	7	1

Group D

Oct 13:
East Bengal (Ind) 2-3 Al Shorta (Irq);
Al Seeb (Oma) 0-3 Al Hussein (Jor)
Oct 27:
Al Seeb (Oma) 0-0 East Bengal (Ind);
Al Shorta (Irq) 1-1 Al Hussein (Jor)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Shorta	3	2	1	0	5	3	7
Al Hussein	3	1	2	0	6	3	5
East Bengal	3	0	2	1	4	5	2
Al Seeb	3	0	1	2	0	4	1

World Service

East Region

Group E

Oct 14:
Melbourne Victory (Aus) 3-0 FC Seoul (Kor);
Persib Bandung (Idn) 1-0 The Cong–Viettel (Vie)
Oct 28:
The Cong–Viettel (Vie) 0-5 FC Seoul (Kor);
Persib Bandung (Idn) 2-0 Melbourne Victory (Aus)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Persib	3	3	0	0	4	0	9
Melbourne Victory	3	1	1	1	4	3	4
FC Seoul	3	1	0	2	5	4	3
The Cong-Viettel	3	0	1	2	1	7	1

Group F

Oct 15:
Tai Po (Hkg) 0-1 Lion City Sailors (Sgp); BG Pathum United (Tha) 1-2 Adelaide United (Aus)
Oct 29:
Adelaide United (Aus) 0-2 Lion City Sailors (Sgp);
Tai Po (Hkg) 0-3 BG Pathum United (Tha)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lion City Sailors	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Adelaide United	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
BG Pathum United	3	1	1	1	5	3	4
Tai Po	3	0	0	3	0	7	0

Group G

Oct 15:
PKR Svay Rieng (Cam) 0-0 Shanghai Shenhua (Chn); Tampines Rovers (Sgp) 0-1 Machida Zelvia (Jpn)
Oct 29:
Tampines Rovers (Sgp) 1-5 PKR Svay Rieng (Cam);
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 0-1 Machida Zelvia (Jpn)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Machida Zelvia	3	3	0	0	4	0	9
PKR Svay Rieng	3	1	1	1	5	3	4
Shanghai Shenhua	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Tampines Rovers	3	0	0	3	2	8	0

Group H

Oct 15: Gangwon FC (Kor) 1-2 Phnom Penh Crown (Cam); Kuching City (Mas) 1-1 Kitchee (Hkg)
Oct 29: Gangwon FC (Kor) 1-0 Kuching City (Mas);
Phnom Penh Crown (Cam) 2-0 Kitchee (Hkg)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Phnom Penh Crown	3	3	0	0	6	2	9
Gangwon FC	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Kitchee	3	0	2	1	1	3	2
Kuching City	3	0	1	2	2	4	1

● *All group standings are before November's ties. November's results will feature in January's issue*

2026-27 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

West Region

Group A

Oct 17: Ahal (Tkm) 2-2 Paro (Bhu);
Ansar (Lbn) 2-0 Al Ittihad Ahli (Syr)
Oct 20: Paro (Bhu) 1-2 Ansar (Lbn);
Al Ittihad Ahli (Syr) 5-1 Ahal (Tkm)
Oct 23: Ahal (Tkm) 2-1 Ansar (Lbn);
Al Ittihad Ahli (Syr) 2-1 Paro (Bhu)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ansar*	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Al Ittihad Ahli*	3	2	0	1	7	4	6
Ahal	3	1	1	1	5	8	4
Paro	3	0	1	2	4	6	1

Qualify for quarter-finals

Group B

Oct 17: Nejmeh (Lbn) 1-0 Istiklol (Tjk);
Al Arabi (Kuw) 0-1 Homs Al Fidaa (Syr)
Oct 20: Istiklol (Tjk) 2-0 Al Arabi (Kuw):
Homs Al Fidaa (Syr) 2-1 Nejmeh (Lbn)
Oct 23: Al Arabi (Kuw) 1-3 Nejmeh (Lbn);
Istiklol (Tjk) 0-2 Homs Al Fidaa (Syr)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Homs Al Fidaa*	3	3	0	0	5	1	9
Nejmeh	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Istiklol	3	1	0	2	2	3	3
Al Arabi	3	0	0	3	1	6	0

Qualify for quarter-finals

Group C

Oct 17: Goa (Ind) 1-2 Regar-TadAZ (Tjk);
Al Qadsia (Kuw) 3-0 Fortis (Ban)
Oct 20: Fortis (Ban) 1-2 Goa (Ind);
Regar-TadAZ (Tjk) 0-1 Al Qadsia (Kuw)
Oct 23: Fortis (Ban) 3-1 Regar-TadAZ (Tjk);
Goa (Ind) 1-2 Al Qadsia (Kuw)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Qadsia*	3	3	0	0	6	1	9
Fortis	3	1	0	2	4	6	3
Goa	3	1	0	2	4	5	3
Regar-TadAZ	3	1	0	2	3	5	3

Qualify for quarter-finals

East Region

Group D

Oct 18: Borneo (Idn) 2-0 Yangon United (Mya)
Oct 21: Tainan City (Tpe) 1-3 Borneo (Idn)
Oct 24: Tainan City (Tpe) 1-1 Yangon United (Mya)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Borneo*	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Tainan City*	2	0	1	1	2	4	1
Yangon United	2	0	1	1	1	3	1
One Taguig**	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Qualify for quarter-finals
**Withdrew*

Group E

Oct 18: Shan United (Mya) 1-1 Hang Yuan (Tpe);
Manila Digger (Phi) 5-0 Kasuka (Bru)
Oct 21: Kasuka (Bru) 0-2 Shan United (Mya);
Hang Yuan (Tpe) 1-1 Manila Digger (Phi)
Oct 24: Hang Yuan (Tpe) 1-2 Kasuka (Bru);
Manila Digger (Phi) 4-0 Hang Yuan (Tpe)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Manila Digger*	3	2	1	0	10	1	7
Shan United*	3	1	1	1	3	5	4
Kasuka	3	1	0	2	2	8	3
Hang Yuan	3	0	2	1	3	4	2

Qualify for quarter-finals

2026 AUSTRALIA CUP

Quarter-Finals

Aug 18-19:
Southern Districts Raiders 0–1 Sydney FC;
APIA Leichhardt 0–1 Melbourne Victory *(AET)*
Aug 25-26:
Lions FC 4–0 North Sunshine Eagles;
Preston Lions 1–2 South Melbourne

Semi-Finals

Sep 9: Sydney FC 0–2 Melbourne Victory
Sep 15: South Melbourne 3–1 Lions FC

Final

Oct 10: South Melbourne 1-1 Melbourne Victory *(AET, South Melbourne win 4-3 on pens)*

Final Table 2026

BHUTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Paro (C)	18	16	1	1	74	12	49
Thimphu City	18	12	4	2	49	14	40
Thimphu FC	18	10	2	6	27	22	32
Transport United	18	9	3	6	28	24	30
Royal Thimphu College	18	8	4	6	29	20	28
Drukpa	18	6	6	6	36	29	24
BFF Academy	18	5	5	8	29	45	20
Tsirang	18	4	4	10	27	48	16
Tensung	18	2	2	14	14	53	8
Ugyen Academy	18	2	1	15	15	61	7

AFRICA

2026-27 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Second Round Qualifying – 1st Leg

Oct 16: APR (Rwa) 0-1 Zamalek (Egy);
El Merriekh Bentiu (Ssd) 0-1 Pyramids (Egy)
Oct 17: African Stars (Nam) 0-1 Orlando Pirates (RSA); CFFA (Mad) 0-4 Young Africans (Tan);
Star Sport Academy (Sle) 0-2 RS Berkane (Mar);
San Pedro (Civ) 2-1 Nouadhibou (Mtn);
TP Mazembe (Cod) 1-1 Club Africain (Tun)
Oct 18: Wiliete (Ang) 0-0 Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA); Scottland (Zim) 2-0 Petro Atletico (Ang);
Asswehly (Lby) 1-0 Esperance (Tun); Sidama (Eth) 0-2 Al Hilal (Sud); Maghreb Fez (Mar) 1-1 ASEC Mimosas (Civ); Teungueth (Sen) 0-2 Colombe Sportive (Cmr); Rangers (Nga) 2-0 MC Alger (Alg); Horoya (Gui) 1-0 Al Merrikh (Sud)
Oct 20: 15 de Agosto (Eqg) 1-6 Simba (Tan)

Second Round Qualifying – 2nd Leg

Oct 21:
Young Africans (Tan) 4-1 CFFA (Mad) (agg 8-1)
Oct 23: Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1-1 Wiliete (Ang) (agg 1-1, *Wiliete win on away goals*); Petro Atletico (Ang) 3-0 Scottland (Zim) (agg 3-2); MC Alger (Alg) 3-0 Rangers (Nga) (agg 3-2); Orlando Pirates (RSA) 4-0 African Stars (Nam) (agg 5-0)
Oct 24: Esperance (Tun) 1-0 Asswehly (Lby) (agg 1-1, *Esperance win 3-1 on pens*); Zamalek (Egy) 1-0 APR (Rwa) (agg 2-0); Pyramids (Egy) 4-0 El Merriekh Bentiu (Ssd) (agg 5-0); RS Berkane (Mar) 1-0 Star Sport Academy (Sle) (agg 3-0); Al Merrikh (Sud) 1-0 Horoya (Gui) (agg 1-1, *Horoya win 5-3 on pens*)
Oct 25: Simba (Tan) 3-0 15 de Agosto (Eqg) (agg 9-1); Al Hilal (Sud) 2-0 Sidama (Eth) (agg 4-0); ASEC Mimosas (Civ) 1-2 Maghreb Fez (Mar) (agg 2-3); Colombe Sportive (Cmr) 1-0 Teungueth (Sen) (agg 3-0); Nouadhibou (Mtn) 2-0 San Pedro (Civ) (agg 3-2); Club Africain (Tun) 1-0 TP Mazembe (Cod) (agg 2-1)

2026-27 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Second Round Qualifying – 1st Leg

Oct 16: ZED (Egy) 1-1 Azam (Tan);
Welwalo Adigrat (Eth) 0-4 Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby)
Oct 17: CO Korhogo (Civ) 0-0 AS FAR (Mar);
Kitara (Uga) 1-2 Al Ahly (Egy); AFAD Djekanou (Civ) 1-1 CS Sfaxien (Tun); ES Zarzis (Tun) 1-3 Real Bamako (Mli); Red Arrows (Zam) 1-0 Kaizer Chiefs (RSA); Rayon Sports (Rwa) 0-2 Black Bulls (Moz)
Oct 18: Tusker (Ken) 0-1 Singida Black Stars (Tan); El-Kanemi Warriors (Nga) 2-2 Raja (Mar); Diarra (Mli) 3-2 ASKO Kara (Tgo); Kabuscorp (Ang) 1-4 AS Maniema Union (Cod); Durban City (RSA) 3-1 AS Port-Louis (Mri); DC Virunga (Cod) 1-2 Primeiro de Agosto (Ang)
Nov TBC:
AS Douanes (Mtn) v CR Belouizdad (Alg)

Second Round Qualifying – 2nd Leg

Oct 23: Raja (Mar) 2-0 El-Kanemi Warriors (Nga) (agg 4-2); Kaizer Chiefs (RSA) 1-0 Red Arrows (Zam) (agg 1-1, *Red Arrows win 3-2 on pens*); Primeiro de Agosto (Ang) 1-0 DC Virunga (Cod) (agg 3-1)
Oct 24: Azam (Tan) 1-0 ZED (Egy) (agg 2-1); Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) 4-1 Welwalo Adigrat (Eth) (agg 8-1); CS Sfaxien (Tun) 1-0 AFAD Djekanou (Civ) (agg 2-1); Real Bamako (Mli) 2-2 ES Zarzis (Tun) (agg 5-3); Black Bulls (Moz) 2-2 Rayon Sports (Rwa) (agg 4-2)
Oct 25: Al Ahly (Egy) 4-0 Kitara (Uga) (agg 6-1); Singida Black Stars (Tan) 1-1 Tusker (Ken) (agg 2-1); USM Alger (Alg) w/o The Panthers (Eqg) (*USM Alger advance after The Panthers withdrew*); AS FAR (Mar) 2-1 CO Korhogo (Civ) (agg 2-1); ASKO Kara (Tgo) 1-0 Diarra (Mli) (agg 3-3, *ASKO Kara win on away goals*); AS Maniema Union (Cod) 4-1 Kabuscorp (Ang) (agg 8-2); AS Port-Louis (Mri) 0-3 Durban City (RSA) (agg 1-6)
Nov TBC:
CR Belouizdad (Alg) v AS Douanes (Mtn)

OCEANIA

Final Table 2026

SAMOA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vaipuna (C)	18	16	2	0	128	11	50
Lupe o le Soaga	18	15	3	0	85	11	48
Vaivase-Tai	18	11	2	5	43	22	35
Lepea	18	8	3	7	48	39	27
Kiwi	18	8	3	7	33	35	27
Vaitele-Uta	18	5	4	9	46	67	19
Sogi	18	5	3	10	33	38	18
Faatoia United	18	5	1	12	36	95	16
Lotopa Rams	18	4	2	12	22	60	14
Moaula United (R)	18	1	1	16	20	116	4

December 2026 *Vol. 67 No.4*

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PICTURES
Pictures copyright: Getty Images

SPECIAL THANKS THIS ISSUE TO:
Keir Radnedge, Mark Gleeson, Lee Wingate, Luke Nicoli, Raphael Jucobin, Steve Menary & Alamy

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Vladimir Jugovic

Red Star Belgrade v Colo-Colo

1991 Intercontinental Cup, National Stadium

The former Yugoslavia midfielder was a European champion with both Red Star Belgrade and Italian giants Juventus, but the performance that launched his career took place in Tokyo 35 years ago

Red Star hero... Vladimir Jugovic
Credit: Alamy

The match against Colo-Colo left a mark on the beginning of my career. It was proof that I had reached a certain level and it was a ticket for me, as a young player, to enter into European and world football.

It was my second season in Red Star Belgrade's first team. In the first season I won the European Cup, and in the second, as the youngest player in the team, I won the Intercontinental Cup in a game where I scored two goals and was named Man of the Match.

I guess it was the best way for someone to enter into professional football at the top level. It meant that the doors were open for me. People noticed and remembered me – it was great for my self-confidence.

Our victory in that game meant a lot for us at the club and it meant a lot for our football as a whole; especially as we played with ten men for more than half of the game, after Dejan Savicevic was sent off in the 42nd minute.

I scored the first goal after a fine pass from Savicevic, who found me in the box, but it was not simple to score. I did it with two touches, controlling the ball with my left foot and scoring with the outside of my right foot.

For the second goal, I participated in the build-up and then scored from a rebound from close range. I was also involved for our third goal, as I played a pass to Sinisa Mihajlovic, who then made a perfect assist for Darko Pancev.

If you look at the final score, you might think it was an easy win for us but it was a tough game, one where all of us had to put in a lot of running and fighting. When you play against the champions of South America, and you are a man down, you have to run twice as much. As a central midfielder, I had to read the game and to cover a lot of space; and it turned out that I also created chances and scored.

None of that happened by chance. As a youngster I prepared myself for that with hard work in Red Star's youth academy. This club prepares you to be a winner. Who accepts it, will succeed. Who doesn't, will not become a winner.

Colo-Colo were a very good team. They were not winners of the Copa Libertadores by chance. With Mirko Jozic they also had a quality coach, who I knew from coaching me in various youth selections of Yugoslavia. But I guess we surprised them. Perhaps they didn't expect that we were so strong.

As Man of the Match, I was supposed to get a special award from the Japanese organisers, a Toyota Land Cruiser. However, even before the ceremony, our chief executive Vladimir Cvetkovic practically ordered me to share that award with the team. Maybe he thought that I didn't have a driver's licence yet, or that it was too dangerous for me to drive such a big car in Belgrade of the 1990s!

> "It was a ticket for me, as a young player, to enter into European and world football"

Interview by Vladimir Novak

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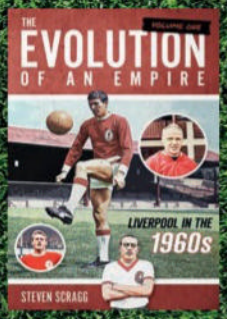

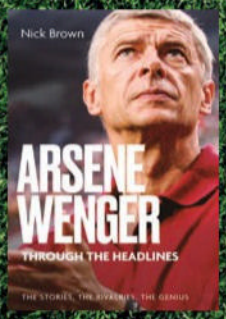

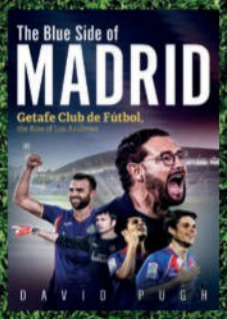

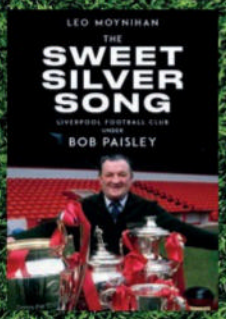

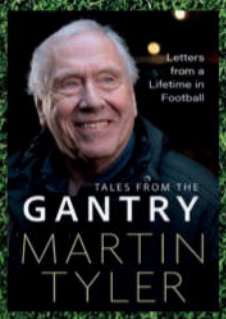

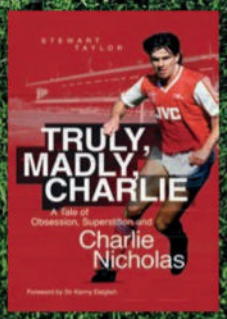

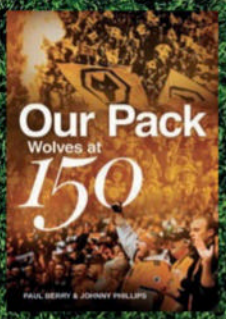

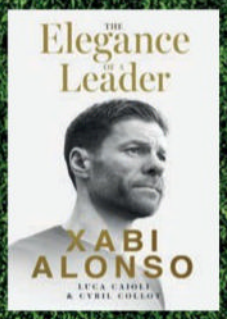

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